



TOUR 2

2004-2009

Live to Cirque



SECOND TOUR: 2004-2009

Although you may not know it at the moment it's occurring, interest in a particular subject rises and falls like ocean waves rolling over the white sands of an uncharted beach or, if you prefer, like the rising and setting sun. And you'd think that, with *Le Grand Chapiteau* and *Fascination* going strong, *Le Grand Tour* under by belt and taking part in the creation of *CirqueCon*, an unofficial gathering of Cirque du Soleil fans, my interest in all things Cirque would be flying high. For the first year of this second tour, or cycle, that was absolutely true. But it's as the old idiom suggests: what goes up must come down; burnout begins to set in as we overindulge in too much of a good thing. And it's during this five-year period that my interest in Cirque du Soleil took a rather sharp nosedive.

During this period, *Fascination* missed its publishing deadline for the first time ever (there was no December 2004 issue), then went silent for half a year (May 2005 was the last regular monthly issue; there were two more, though: one in August and another in October before the newsletter's publication ceased for months). The participation in the Yahoo Group began to wane as software glitches prevented anyone from posting – this begat the creation of Groupe Discute and later CirqueTribune out of Discute's ashes (which has since disbanded). And Cirque du Soleil itself was exploding exponentially with an ever-increasing number of projects, with seemingly little care in detail.

And there were personal factors involved: I caught the travel bug when undertaking “Le Grand Tour” and my experience backpacking throughout Europe in early 2003 turned me into a travel hound. I hatched a plan to visit all the continents by the time I'd turn 30 (in 2007) and set my sights on Asia (for 2004), Australia (in 2005), South America & Antarctica (in 2006) and Africa (in 2007) at that time. I'd make it to Asia – Japan – in 2004 before something else would derail those plans: love. In early 2004 I would meet the girl who would later become my wife and my life totally changed. I went back to university and finished my degree (I had to drop out when I was laid off in late 2002) and my focus changed from traveling to see Cirque and the world to traveling to see the love of my life.

We met online you see; we weren't in the same city, but it was Cirque du Soleil that brought us together. She happened to see *Mystère* one day and had a few questions about the show's wacky characters. She searched online for information about them, landing on *Le Grand Chapiteau*. Although she found the answer she was looking for, browsing the site offered up even more questions, so she emailed those directly to me not really expecting me to respond. When I did she sent even more questions and soon we began chatting regularly through the Yahoo Cirque discussion group's hosted “CirqueChat” on all sorts of topics, not just Cirque du Soleil.

And when we found out we had a number of things in common, well... the seeds of intimacy were sewed and my life forever changed. For the better of course!

Although those personal factors and more played a part in this period's decline in my Cirque du Soleil fandom, much of the animosity I felt was stirred by CirqueCon itself.

The idea itself was sound (the history of which is chronicled in "The History of CirqueCon" as published on CirqueCon.com) and the inaugural event held in Vancouver was amazingly good fun (which you can read about inside); however, egos and personalities clashed both in front-of-house and behind-the-scenes. Most of the initial rows were caused mostly out of misunderstandings and out-of-context reasons, such as when snap-decisions had to be made with little room for due course. While those decisions turned out to be the best to make at that time, the way they were made, and who made them, irked some. Who likes to be bossed around on their vacation, you know? Additionally, there was an age / orientation difference between the two main groups in attendance (one group were in their 40s while the other skewed much younger – early 20s and late teens) that was hard to reconcile between them.

Although the differences between the two attended groups caused an early schism, planning for the second *CirqueCon* event (for April 2005 in Montreal) went forward; the dynamics behind-the-scenes began to change too. What began as a collaborative creative endeavor quickly became mired in process over substance. No longer were we to be seen as the rag-tag group of fans we were, but rather a unified outfit steeped in organization and regulation. While I can appreciate the need to present a unified front not only to Cirque du Soleil but our paying guests too – our numbers certainly climbed four-fold for Montreal (120 vs. 30) and was then expected to double again for Las Vegas, so certainly some semblance of order should be expected – it was the assumption that all of us were on board with these changes, and CirqueCon's new direction, when we weren't.

The resulting direction was that CirqueCon was to become more corporate, structured, governed by a Board of Directors, of which (as a founder of CirqueCon) I was a member. Events would then be solicited through written proposals by potential Chairmen and voted up or down accordingly. Anyone could proposition a proposal of course, but it was clear early on that only those the Board felt could handle the job (i.e., those with direct experience) would get approval. And just like that *CirqueCon* ceased to be fun. Oh don't get me wrong: I rather enjoyed putting the events together for fans, but internally it was becoming a nightmare. To make a very long story short (although you can read a little more about it in "The History of CirqueCon"), I had to fight to get *CirqueCon 2007 Orlando* off the ground. I had to fight to set *CirqueCon 2009 Monterrey* in motion. I had to fight to bring *CirqueCon 2010* to New York City. Eventually I tired of fighting.

But even though *CirqueCon* was the huge prevailing force throughout this five-year period, there were still many good times to be had (both at and outside of CirqueCon)...



APRIL 2005

« The Journey Continues... »

CirqueCon 2005: Montreal!

CirqueCon 2005 MONTRÉAL

The Second Unofficial Gathering of Cirque du Soleil Passionates

At our meet-and-greet "Cocktail Hour" at CirqueCon 2004: Vancouver, the CirqueCon team debated taking our newly formed band of Passionates to Cirque's "flower in the desert" for our second CirqueCon event. Salivating at the prospect of entertaining each of the shows, the location was all but decided by the time our glasses emptied. But then André Belanger, Internet Marketing Manager for Cirque du Soleil in Montréal, (who had made the trip from Cirque International Headquarters to be with us) made the very vocal suggestion that we should gather again for the premiere of the newest Cirque traveling show - in Montréal - instead! Excited about the possibilities and the new opportunities expressed therein, we took up the invite to jet off to Canada's French enclave, leaving the proposal of Las Vegas on the table. With such an open invitation, who were we to say no?

But it came with many new challenges. With expanded publicity efforts and a longer lead time, the exponential increase in attendance we expected was daunting. Finding the right facility and a nice place to have a group meal, in a city we weren't intimately familiar with, took time.

"Is there anything more magical than Old Montréal in the springtime? Well maybe Old Montréal in the springtime during a Cirque du Soleil world premiere weekend! Some of our most dedicated fans are organizing an event next spring in Montréal for Cirque du Soleil fans from around the world. This unofficial gathering, headed by Keith Johnson from Seattle, Washington, will be taking place during the world premiere weekend of Cirque 2005 next April and we are thrilled to help him get the message out to you.

- The event runs from Friday, April 22, 2005 to Sunday, April 24, 2005.
- Tickets for the conference are for Saturday, April 23, 2005 at 8:00 p.m.
- The conference is organized by Keith Johnson, LouAnna Valentine and Ricky Russo.

This event is not being organized by Cirque du Soleil but we will be there to help make it an unforgettable!

- Cirque du Soleil, December 8, 2004

But in the end we think we came up with solutions that satisfied nearly all. Our members for Montreal were impressive - 130 members total - and they came from more than half of the United States, all the Canadian provinces that touch the US (except Manitoba, what's with them Manitobans, anyway?), three locations in Mexico, as well as Australia and Germany. WOW!

It was a pretty amazing trip!

/// DAY ONE – FRIDAY, APRIL 22ND

We hit the ground running on our first day with a visit to the relatively new TOHU Complex in Montreal's Saint Michel district. Located at the center of the *Cité des arts du cirque*, TOHU is a non-profit organization founded by En Piste, a collective comprising several prominent organizations in Canadian circus arts (most notably the National Circus School and Cirque du Soleil), built as a place for dissemination, creation, experimentation and convergence of culture, environment and community involvement. Membership in TOHU represents a major aspect of Cirque du Soleil's social and cultural action policy. It's creation is a combination of dream merged with reality (kind of like a Cirque Show), whose mission is to create a circus arts "city" in the province of Québec as a unique means to centralize the creation, training, production and performance of circus arts in the province and as a major centre for the development of artists. Or so they say. Our two-hour tour (3:00p - 5:00p) covered all aspects of the site, from environmental considerations to their burgeoning circus memorabilia and art collection.

During the tour we learned that TOHU has a unique approach to fulfilling its mission while at the same time promoting culture, ensuring environmental sustainability in all of its actions, and revitalizing the local community. The organization's cultural mission is to establish Montreal as the circus arts capital of the world by creating a community to pool the creativity, expertise, talent and entrepreneurship of Québec's circus sector.

TOHU is already home of *l'École Nationale de Cirque* which is a prestigious, world-class school for the training of circus artists. Another step towards TOHU's cultural goal is the presence of the internationally renowned, circus industry leader Cirque du Soleil's headquarters. In 2000 the company's international headquarters was expanded and in June 2003 the company opened a brand new official artists' residence in the TOHU neighborhood. The final piece of the cultural mosaic is the Chapiteau des Arts, which it completed last summer.

Located at the intersection of Jarry and d'Iberville streets, the Chapiteau features a unique, circular, 840-seat performance hall, exhibition space, reception hall, artists workshops, studios, and bar/restaurant, as well as serving as the home of TOHU's administrative offices. The Chapiteau des Arts hosts performances year-round; some developed in-house, and others from around the world.



The building is surrounded by a large public square where a 1700-seat big top will be erected in the summertime. The square is home to a variety of free cultural and environmental activities. Every Sunday afternoon during the summer, TOHU has been the site of free outdoor concert and dance performance series co-sponsored by Cirque du Soleil.



The Chapiteau des Arts also houses the welcome center for the *Centre Environnementale de Saint-Michel* (Saint-Michel Environmental Complex), which dovetails with TOHU's second mission of operating in an environmentally sustainable manner. TOHU's site (including the headquarters of Cirque du Soleil) is situated on the edge of the CESM, a 192-hectare territory that was a limestone quarry at the turn of the 20th century. It was turned into a landfill in 1968 and by the end of the 1980s received nearly

one million tons of trash every year. In 1988, the site was acquired by the City of Montreal and became the focus of one of the largest environmental rehabilitation projects ever undertaken by the city. The CESM development plan called for the former landfill site to be transformed into an urban park with educational, cultural, sports and commercial/industrial sectors. TOHU's presence will fulfill the CESM's cultural mandate.

The *Chapiteau des Arts* was designed to reflect TOHU's environmental values of ecology, recycling, recovery and renewable energy resources. Environmentally sustainable concepts incorporated into the Chapiteau's design and construction include an ice-bunker system that replaces traditional air-cooling systems, a "green" roof featuring vegetation to serve as a means of insulation and

temperature control, and a "Trombe" wall which passively traps the sun's heat during the day and slowly and evenly release it during the night. The Chapiteau also operates using renewable energy sources. For example the water running in the Chapiteau's heated floor is waste process water from its neighbor Gazmont, a company that turns biogas into electricity. In this sense TOHU has become a major partner in reclaiming and renewing a site that was once the victim of environmental short-sightedness.



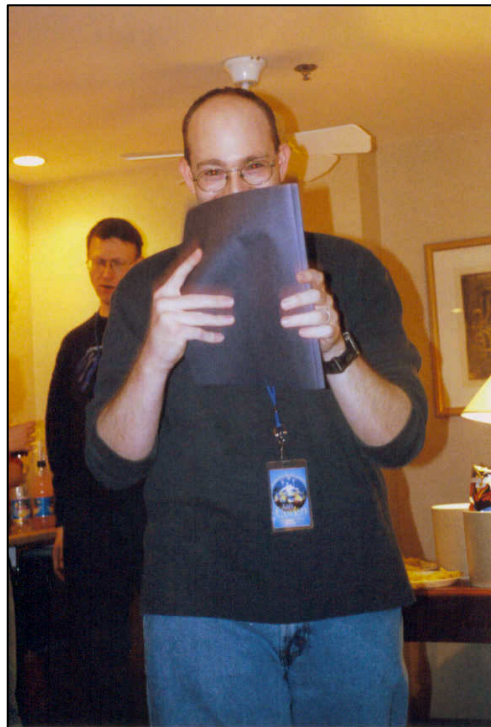
In choosing the Saint-Michel district, TOHU has already made a large step towards fulfillment of its third mission of community revitalization. The Saint Michel district in Montreal is one of Canada's most underprivileged neighborhoods.

By establishing their headquarters in Saint Michel, TOHU will revitalize the urban landscape of the neighborhood with its modern architecture and create new community spaces such as parks and public squares. The TOHU programming team will organize community events to encourage neighborhood residents to adopt the space as their own. As TOHU and its member organizations grow the organization will adhere to the principles of social economy and offer area residents long-term employment.

It was a really great visit.

Following our visit at TOHU we invited everyone back to our rooms at our Headquarters Hotel - Marriott Spring Hill Suites Vieux-Montréal - for a little "get to know you" meeting, a gathering with other Cirque Passionates to eat, drink, and talk of our shared passion for Cirque du Soleil: our Meet-and-Greet! Rich Alford had taken the room across the corridor from Keith and Lucy and between the two rooms we had quite the party.

It was noisy, fun, and packed! Many of us were able to pick up our membership packets, which contained our Badges, our Group Meal Ticket, our Show Tickets, our Compilation CD, and more! Mine included a T-Shirt that we had made special for the committee.



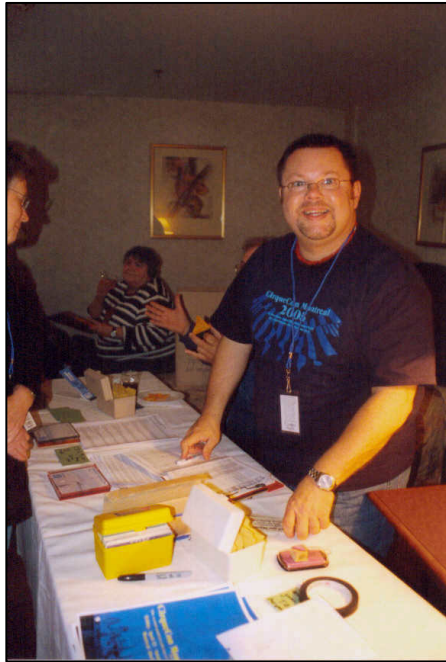
CirqueCon Montreal 2005

The second unofficial gathering of Cirque du Soleil Passionates

April 22nd to 24th, 2005

Standard Membership Ticket

Please redeem for your program packet



The evening ended with a short walk to La Basilique Notre-Dame de Montréal, one of Montreal's first churches, for a modern audio-visual presentation about the history of Montreal and the church. "And Then There Was Light" represents the work of 150 artists and skilled technicians. During the show 26 silent motors move a set of screens, projectors and curtains in this superb, highly automated production.



Dedicated to Our Lady the Blessed Virgin - "Notre Dame" - the small original chapel was operated at first by the Jesuits, then the Sulpician Fathers, who in 1657 undertook construction of a larger church. Its construction, in Baroque style was completed between 1672 and 1683. By 1800, the original church had become too small, and the Fabrique decided to build the church we know today. To design the new church, the building council

engaged the services of the New York architect James O'Donnell - himself an Irish Protestant by origin.

O'Donnell and the Fabrique opted for the Gothic Revival style then in vogue in England and the United States. The main construction work took place between 1824 and 1829. Unfortunately, O'Donnell did not live to see his work completed; he died in Montreal in 1830. By 1843 the church's twin towers were completed. The western tower, nicknamed La Persévérance (Perseverance), and finished in 1841, houses the great bell christened "Jean-Baptiste," weighing 11 tons (11,000 kilograms or 24,000 pounds). The eastern tower, nicknamed La Tempérance (Temperance), was completed in 1843 and houses a carillon of 10 bells.

A fire seriously damaged the chapel on December 7, 1978. Reconstruction was undertaken by the architectural firm of Jodin, Lamarre, Pratte and Associates, whose plan suggested rebuilding the first two levels to be identical to the original chapel, with skilled carpenters, sculptors and woodworkers using traditional methods. The vault was built in a modern style allowing for natural lighting. The new chapel was opened in 1982. It was an enlightening way to end our first day, but the fun had just begun!



/// DAY TWO – SATURDAY, APRIL 23RD

Although everyone had a great time touring TOHU, joining us in our rooms for our Meet-and-Greet and more the day before, today's activities were what everyone looked forward to... and why not? With a visit to Cirque's International Headquarters, our Group Meal, and Group show on the agenda, it was an exciting day fun-filled with Cirque-y adventures!



First, beginning at 11:45am, Cirque du Soleil opened its doors just for us. They had scheduled a tour of their International Headquarters but had left it up to us to figure out how to get there. Located off the beaten path in Montreal's Saint Michel district (part of the TOHU complex), fans had to use the subway and busses, carpool, take a taxi, or drive the 10 or so miles from Old Montreal to the IHQ. But come they did!

And why wouldn't they? Not only did Cirque offer us a tour of their facilities, they also offered us the opportunity to shop at their Headquarters Boutique - the first time the IHQ Boutique has been open to non-employees - ever! It was similar in "style" to the boutiques on tour, with everything out and available for handling, and at a 15% discount, but I'm getting ahead of myself here...

Cirque was quite organized - they divided us into three groups with chaperones and we were on our way. We visited the entirety of the complex, from the training facilities to the costume shops and around the offices. Here's what we learned...

As Cirque du Soleil passed its first decade and found its repertoire growing at an impressive clip, rather than having many of its creative companies spread out amongst various buildings, warehouses and shops across Montréal, Cirque du Soleil decided its artists must have a single home in which



to gather, create, rehearse, and dream; therefore, "The Studio", Cirque's new International Headquarters in Montréal, was born. In keeping with the company's imaginative style and risk-taking ethos, the Cirque crafted a \$40-60 Million CDN complex atop one of the biggest landfills in all of North America (the second largest in fact) in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city - the Saint Michel District. Construction began in June 1995 and within a year all of the Cirque's creative employees had moved into the "The Studio".

The complex was designed by Dan Hanganu and Eric Gauthier, both well-known Canadian architects. They supervised the buildings initial inauguration (on February 20, 1997) as well as its two build outs: one completed in June 1998 and the second in December 2000. Although the entire complex covers approximately 75,000 square meters of land (at a cost of \$1.10 CDN per square foot) the "Studio" covers only 32,000 square meters of it. At first glance the exterior of the IHQ is very industrial looking; aluminum siding, large windows and a sprawling parking lot. However, there are little artistic touches to the exterior that hint at the work of the buildings occupants; walls painted blue and yellow (Cirque's company colors), exquisite landscaping including a large vegetable garden, and artwork such as a large metal sculpture depicting a chair balancing act.



The interior of the building also has a modern, industrial feel; the buildings support beams and pipes are visible, there are big bay doors that lead into the various studios, and aluminum siding is used inside as well. Though industrial the building isn't cold. It is clean, comfortable and very cool!



Inside the 32,000 square meter studio complex resides...

- two Training Bays
- a 361 square meter Dance Studio
- a 3,761 square meter Costume Shop
- a 929 square meter Props Workshop
- a Cafeteria (named "Delirium")
- Corporate offices, and much, much more!

Our first stop was the Costume Workshop.

Within this large fluorescent-lit workshop a variety of costume pieces can be found on display. Some full and ready to wear while others, partially completed, can be seen strewn amongst the fabric processing machines, washing machines and sewing machines in the shop. In the shoe station you might see footwear such as the reptilian slippers of the Varekai creatures and the muscle-vein boots of the Bateau acrobats from "O". In textiles, you might see a half-made Varekai Water Meteor costume sitting on a bench surrounded by various material samples as the seamstresses craft the costume.



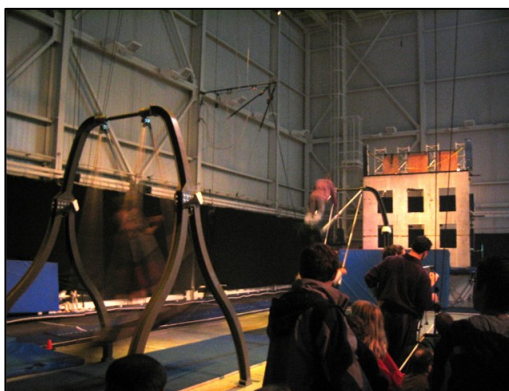
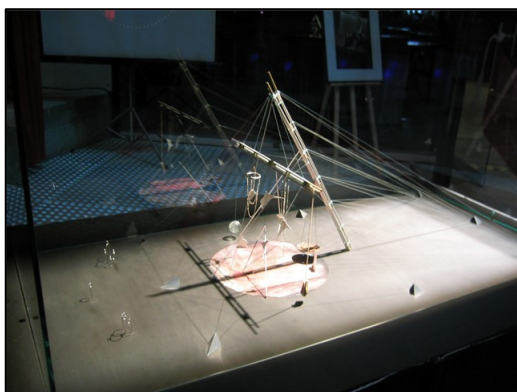
Over in the headwear station where all of the hats, masks and wigs are made, you might see renditions of the African masks worn by the Dralion hoop divers, the Double Face mask and Taiko Tribe headpieces from *Mystère*, several Old Bird masks from *Alegría*, the large bird beak worn by a character in "O" and the latex pseudo wigs worn by characters in *Zumanity* on display for reference. In wigs, an intricate hairstyle guide worn by the Washington Trapezist in "O" sits next to the contortionists' wigs from the same show sitting next to the leggings worn by the Satyr character in *Zumanity*.



Downstairs is where all the props used within a Cirque du Soleil show are made. Here you might find latex molds used for making heads of puppets, light- acrylic chairs used in a dance sequence, or other costume prop pieces. The props workshop is also where all Cirque du Soleil artists go to get plaster molds made of their heads for costume purposes. All of the headpieces are tailor-made on a mold of the artist's head to fit each specific performer exactly. You might see a number of plaster molds as there are shelves full here!

Traversing corridors decorated with framed advertising posters from previous engagements of various Cirque du Soleil shows will lead you to Studio A/B, the large training studios. Throughout the day several different acrobatic acts can be rehearsed here, such as: Flying trapeze, Aerial Hoops, Chinese Poles, Body Skating and Bateau (aerial act from 'O'). Or you may find artists simply practicing individual skills. Other smaller studios are housed here (C, D and E) and within them you may find an Aerial Hoop, Spanish Webs or Russian Swings set up for routine rehearsals.





We finished off at their in-house boutique, where we were offered a 15% discount! It was hard to drag some of our Passionates out of the Boutique, but we were then addressed by Bernard Petoit, their Vice-President of Artistic Products and Patrick G  linas, Chief of Rigging Equipment. Can you imagine the lot of us on the staircase in the main lobby? Well, we were! Then we were treated to a buffet while we

watched a presentation from Celebrity Cruises, who had just partnered with Cirque on their "Bar at the Edge of the Earth" concept. In fact, two representatives had flown up from Florida just to speak with us!

We were giddy as all get out.

We didn't want to leave!



Group Meal & Show

One of the highlights of CirqueCon 2004: Vancouver was 30+ Cirque fans from all over North America gathered at the Spaghetti Factory in Gastown, enjoying a spaghetti dinner and getting to know each other. It was something we thought was worth repeating. But could we find a reasonably-priced restaurant able to hold a large number of diners and still be close to the hotel? Of course! Our venue, the Restaurant du Vieux Port was just down the block from our hotel, less than one minutes walking distance! The restaurant offered us a "group menu" of: Choice of soup or salad, choice of Beef Striploin, Grilled Chicken Breast, or Filet of Soul Provencale entrée, and dessert, along with coffee, tea, or soft drink. The total cost per person, including all taxes and gratuity, was \$31.00 USD. The dinner was very successful, with more than 60 Cirque Passionates spread amongst several tables in a large room, enjoying their meals and talking animatedly!



And then, as the skies opened up and the winds turned colder, it was finally time for our show...



Corteo, which means "cortege" in Italian, combines the craft of the actor with the prowess of the acrobat to plunge the audience into a world of playfulness and spontaneity situated in a mysterious area between Heaven and Earth. Corteo is a grand procession, a festive parade imagined by a clown. Juxtaposing the large with the small, the ridiculous with the tragic and the magic of perfection with the charm of imperfection, the show highlights the strength and fragility of the clown, as well as his wisdom and kindness, to illustrate the portion of humanity that is within each of us. The clown is Everyman, a cunning idiot, a colorful loser who shines a light on all that is difficult and beautiful in life.

Corteo, a timeless revel in which illusion teases reality, evokes the full spectrum of emotion and experience: love, friendship, pain, joy, wisdom, beauty, life and even death. The cast brings together over 50 artists from 14 different countries:

Armenia, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Italy, Kenya, Romania, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. Corteo explores the circus arts in a way that is brand new to Cirque du

Soleil. Once again, the very limits of acrobatics are challenged as Director Daniele Finzi Pasca lends his unique touch to Cirque's spectacular performances. Corteo redefines the springboard, the Korean frame and the tight-wire, and presents acts that are as original as they are innovative.



side to the other, rather than being out in the round. This is a first for Cirque du Soleil. In the center of the circular stage is a labyrinth which exactly reproduces the proportions and size of the classic design on the floor of the aisle in Chartres cathedral. The labyrinth incorporates an eight-inch Moebius strip painted at its center as a symbol of infinity and continuity.

The set and décor of Corteo plunges the audience into a lyrical world, a strange area between heaven and earth. Set Designer Jean Rabasse has divided the Grand Chapiteau and its rotating stage in two, with each half of the audience facing the other half, so they see not only the performance, but also have a performer's-eye-view of the audience. Thus the stage becomes a 41-foot track upon which performers run from one

Shrouding the set and stage are two enormous baroque-style "Roll Drop" curtains (58 feet wide and almost 40 feet high), and the four sideways-opening Italian-style curtains, which are among the most striking scenic elements in the show. The inspiration for the show's curtains was an 1885 painting by the Parisian artist Adolphe Willette. They were sewn in Canada and sent to France to be painted. It took more than two weeks to paint each of the central curtains in watercolors. The central curtains are attached to huge supports which contain winding motors to roll them.



The curtains also hide what is known as the "Patience", a massive arched technical structure made of steel that dominates the interior of the Grand Chapiteau. It is one of the most complex set elements in the show and is used to transport various scenic elements and pieces of acrobatic equipment on and off stage from above. The Patience has two rails that traverse the Grand Chapiteau. Each rail is fitted with four platform-like carts to carry the scenic and acrobatic elements. The eight

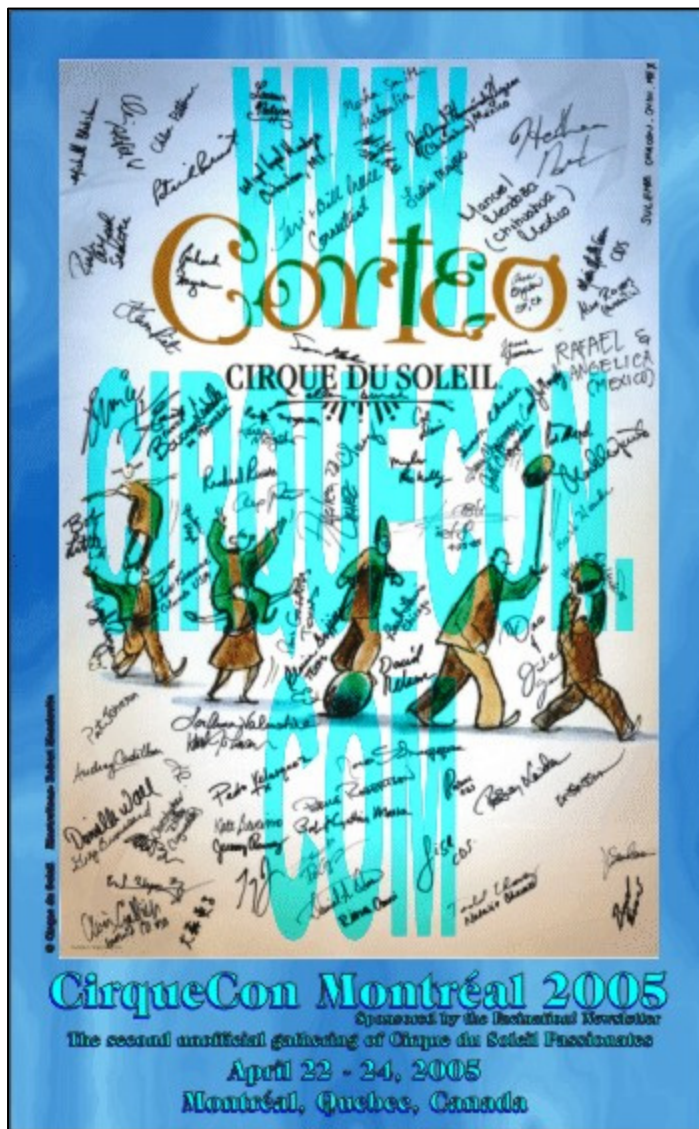
carts have a lifting capacity of 1,000 lbs and a top speed of four feet per second. The Patience is 41 feet above the stage at its highest point. It is entirely self-supporting and could be set up anywhere. All of which is in support of Corteo's talented cast.

To create over 260 costumes for Corteo, Costume Designer Dominique Lemieux set out to accentuate the natural beauty of the artists. She used more than 900 different fabrics, concentrating on natural fibers such as silks, linens, cottons and lace in a subtle color palette that includes blues, pinks, fuchsia and gold with appliquéd spangles and jewels. Many of the fabrics were dyed and airbrushed to give them a patina of age. There are 40 angels in Corteo and 4 types of angels: Arc Angels, Little Angels, Grand Angels and Auguste Angels - in addition to the main characters: The Dead Clown (the one whom this fantastic funeral is honoring), The Loyal Whistler (the ringmaster), The White Clown (the one who opens the door to the magic of the circus for the Dead Clown), and The Clown Trio (two diminutive personalities - one a veritable grand dame of the stage, the other a trickster - and a Giant.)



The show opens with a somber scene; a bell tolls and the lights come up on a grand hall where three large chandeliers hang from the ceiling. We see a clown (Mauro Mozzani) on his death bed. An angel hovers over the clown as his friends and cohorts walk across the stage forming a grand funeral cortège (the show's namesake) en route to pay their last respects.

The Clown dies and the premise of the show is basically his journey through a sort of purgatory where moments from his life, real or imagined, flash before his eyes (and ours as well). *Corteo* is the Dead Clown's journey to heaven, his dream for a final show, his quest for redemption and a celebration of life. The sobriety of the opening scene soon gives way to whimsy...



There was Chandeliers (the Dead Clown's former lovers ascend to perform an aerial act), Bouncing on Beds (a trampoline number reminiscent of the clown's early childhood), Roue Cyr (a metal hoop of about 6 feet in diameter), Tightwire (a young woman dances across a tight-wire using point shoes, a unicycle, multiple hoops, and her bare feet), Juggling (four young artists performing fast-moving feats of prowess), Marionette (a live puppet evoking a beach scene from the clown's childhood), Valentyna's Flight (a small person takes flight over the audience), Teeterboard (three acrobats redefine teeterboard technique in an act where speed is rivaled only by complexity), Paradise (high-flying and bouncing on a Korean frame), Tibetan Bowls (a haunting melody on crystal glasses and a whistling virtuoso), Adagio Duet (a tender pas-de-deux performed by a duo of little people), Not-So-Serious Act (a

manipulation act in which nothing goes right), Equilibriste (a ladder specialist trying desperately to reach the angel who is watching him from above), Teatro Intimo (a wild and zany version of "Romeo and Juliet"), and Tournik (an act which marries horizontal bar techniques with circus arts performed on a central cube-shaped structure).

It was amazing.

After the show ended, many of us returned to the Restaurant du Vieux Port (which was open until Midnight) to have dessert and drinks, and to decompress from the incredible day (and trip) we had!

Although many of us had another day or two in Montreal, this concluded our second CirqueCon event... and despite a rocky road, it turned out to be a great success!



Next stop for CirqueCon: Las Vegas!



AUGUST+ 2006

« A Cortège in Chicago »

Corteo, a Year Later

On a rather cold and rain-soaked evening, I, with over a hundred Cirque du Soleil fans, had the privilege of watching Corteo give its first public performances on the old Quays of Montreal. Unfortunately I came away from the show with mixed feelings. Visually the program was stunning, containing much of what made those in the Dragone era fresh and exciting (attention to detail, mastery of the mise-en-scene, and presentation beyond just the acts themselves), and was certainly a creative departure from more recent Cirque du Soleil offerings, such as Dralion and Varekai, but having experienced the exhilaration the hometown crowd gave to Varekai (while also having a damn good time personally), the encounter with Corteo was somewhat muted. A connection was not made between Corteo and I, a bond that came quite naturally with Varekai and I found the lack of such a link skewed my view of the show.

What was it about Corteo that could not grab me on a deeper level like many of the Cirque's other shows had? It was a question I pondered for weeks and months after without reaching a solution. I admit my aspect of the entire experience may have been colored by the variety of things going on around me, both personally and professionally, but could they account for the poor reception on my part? By the time the tour brought Corteo to Chicago, however, I was ready (and determined) to give the show a second chance. Paul Roberts, a good friend of mine, saw to that actually. He was now getting the opportunity to see the new show and wondered if I would like to join him in Chicago. Since I had never been to the Windy City before, exploring this exceptional city would be equally as exciting as going to the show itself. Therefore, I jumped at the invitation. And wouldn't you know, that just like my first couple of experiences with «O» (which were somewhat negative), the third time was the charm. Corteo and I finally bonded.



/// THE FIVE-MILLIONTH GUEST



A few short days before I jetted off to Chicago for Corteo, another "Live to Cirque" moment occurred, although a little closer to home - La Nouba, the spectacular Cirque du Soleil production exclusively presented at the Walt Disney World Resort, was reaching the important milestone of having hosted 5 million guests. Since attaining that number would not have been possible without the loyalty of Florida residents, Cirque thanked its local fans with two remarkable events: the first, shaving 20% off the regular price of admission on select seats (those in category two) for the summer months; and second, the cast and crew would select a resident of Florida attending the 6:00pm performance on Thursday, August 10th to be Cirque's honorary five millionth guest. According to the press release, "this person [would] enjoy an amazing and one-of-a-kind experience, including a personal on-stage recognition by the cast, interaction with select La Nouba characters during the show, unique La Nouba memorabilia gifts, and an exclusive backstage meet-and-greet with the artists[!]"

How cool!?

And being a Florida resident myself there was no way I was going to miss this opportunity. It could be me!

Strangely enough, though, I did almost miss it.

Four days before the event took place I dropped by the La Nouba box office to secure a seat for the performance. Believing I had beat the odds and all was well, I left with my ticket in hand and returned home, as happy as a clown leading unsuspecting audience members to the wrong seat. I didn't know it at the time, but I had a problem: what is the one thing you're advised to do before leaving the ticket window? Check the date, time of show and seat number as printed on your ticket for any errors. Can you guess what I did not do before I left Downtown Disney that evening? You got it. I didn't notice the error until two days later - the ticket I purchased wasn't just for the wrong show time, it was for the wrong evening! What to do? The money was already spent!?

With just two days left before the festive performance, I had no choice but to rush back down to the Box Office with the hope I could plead my case (and that they had seats left). The nice folks on the phone would not exchange my ticket, quoting policy, et. al., but suggested maybe something could be worked out at the window. Maybe they'd make an exception for a die-hard Cirque fan? After rushing down there following a hard, long day at work (Downtown Disney is in the opposite direction of my residence and rush-hour here is beyond words), my petition for exchange was denied. So, rather than whine, moan and pout about the price of tickets (it was my mistake after all), I purchased a seat for the right evening and watched the show back-to-back instead.

And what stark contrasts they were to each other.

The Wednesday 6:00pm performance was decidedly weak. The house was not at all full, and those who did come did not appear enthused about what they were about to experience. The timid nature of the audience unfortunately rubbed off on the cast, who churned out a rather lackluster performance - one of the most uninspiring I've ever seen. But there was a silver lining in this dark cloud though: I was given the opportunity to watch Ana Cuellar (Rodolfo's friend) perform the flying man act in Yuri's stead. Her take, while virtually the same routine, placed a decidedly more feminine spin on the act. And while the natural emotional tensions present between lovers were missed, Ana's solo rendition was just as beautiful, and just as relevant. Bravo, Ana, bravo!

The atmosphere was very different the following night. The house was packed to the gills - there wasn't an empty seat to be had - and the atmosphere prickled with an electric and excited chatter. This was, of course, a media filled big top and Cirque was, of course, celebrating a huge milestone. I found I could not sit still in my seat to save my life! Before long it was time to start the show; a rather tallish man with salt and pepper hair (albeit more salt than pepper) took the stage. "You're attending a very special performance of La Nouba," a Mr. Dennison (Company Manager) addressed the audience. "We're celebrating our five millionth guest! Which one of you will it be? Hold on to your ticket because we may call your seat! Now to select our honorary guest..." And one of the Les Cons came from backstage clutching a huge, white envelope.

From it they pulled out three huge cue cards - one with a section number, one with a row letter and one with a seat number - large enough for the entire audience to read.

102-E-12

DRAT! I was out of the running on the first card. My seat was in section 205. And just like that the five millionth guest was chosen, and I was not he.

A resident of Orlando was chosen as the honorary winner and was immediately taken to his new seat: a red velvet plush couch stashed right in front of the sound booth on the walkway level (where the pull out chairs usually are). I spotted the couch earlier and wondered what it would be used for and now I had my answer. Definitely an upgrade in seating for he and his wife - center view!

Once seated, the main characters rushed out and presented gifts: a La Nouba DVD, the show's programme book, the show's CD, a Green Bird hat, and more. It was fantastic! Although I did feel a twinge of jealousy; why couldn't that have been me? I'm a Florida resident! I live in Orlando too! Alas, it was not to be. Naturally he was chosen for the bike-jump and at the end of the show, the couple were taken up on stage to run round with the performers as they all took their bows, amidst a plethora of falling balloons and "5 MILLIONTH GUEST - LA NOUBA" projected behind them.

The crowd was ecstatic the entire ninety-minutes and thankfully that enthusiasm rubbed off onto the cast, who stepped up to give us one hell of a performance. It primed me for the next Cirque experience: Corteo in Chicago. And maybe that's why I enjoyed it so much...

/// WELCOME TO CHI-TOWN



From the moment I arrived in Chicago I was in my element. There was a time I was apprehensive about visiting big cities on my own, but exploring places alone in Europe and traversing the country side unaccompanied in Japan taught me that as big and scary they may be, a wondrous adventure emerges if you can set aside your fears long enough to take those first few steps in that new land. And once you start moving, you'll find it's quite hard to stop. We're naturally curious, we humans, so it's hard to turn away

from a new place to explore. Chicago was that to me - a new place to explore. And what better way to do that than on its public transportation system! If you haven't guessed, one aspect of a big city that fascinates me is its public transportation alternatives. I want to know all about it - how it started, where it goes, and how it compares and contrasts with others I've ridden around the world. Call it a hobby of mine. When you come from a place that doesn't have such a thing, visiting a location that does is quite exciting! London has the Tube, Paris the Metropolitan, Tokyo the Metoro and New York the Subway. What does Chicago have? The "EL". As I said: in my element.

The rapid-transit system here has five major lines to speak of, which the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) identifies by color: Blue, Brown, Green, Orange, Purple and Red. The RED line runs north-south through downtown; the Purple line runs north of the city, servicing the Evanston suburb; the GREEN line runs west to south; the BROWN line zigzags along the north; and the BLUE line, which runs through the Bucktown/Wicker Park neighborhoods also runs out to O'Hare Airport, which lies northwest of the city. I came in on the ORANGE line, which runs southwest through the city and serves Chicago's other international airport: Midway.

They all converge above the city's financial district, downtown, referred to as "The Loop", which is where I was headed. The hotel of choice, the Congress Plaza, rested just off of the Monroe stop on the Orange line and was almost as old as the city itself.

Speaking of which, Chicago has a rich history stretching back to the first French settlers in what was then known as the Midwest Territory. Wars and many land purchases over the years brought the territory into our sphere of influence; by 1837 the city was incorporated and began to flourish. Trades of all types and men of all walks of life came to call Chicago home. Then disaster laid siege to the city, setting back decades of prosperity. The Great Fire of 1871 destroyed a swath of land four miles long and 3/4 of a mile wide, encompassing more than 2,000 acres. "Destroyed were more than 73 miles (120 km) of roads, 120 miles (190 km) of sidewalk, 2,000 lampposts, and 17,500 buildings" according to the information pamphlet I had, but miraculously only about 300 people lost their lives.



Although devastated, Chicago endured. Twenty years later the city had made a remarkable recovery. The downtown district, which was completely destroyed in the fire, was bustling again, "swarming with people, streetcars, and horses." Did you know that Chicago is the birthplace of the modern skyscraper? That's right! In 1884, just thirteen years after the fire, the first ever skyscraper was completed. Although no longer standing (it was demolished in 1931 to make room for a newer skyscraper), The Home Insurance Building had 10 stories and rose to a height of 138 feet! Take that New York! Chicago can also lay claim to having the biggest elevated train system in the country (New York had such a system, but the majority of it is now underground), with just almost 290 miles of track. Some of the most famous sections lie downtown, in an elevated loop.



The development of "the Loop" helped to bring order to chaos in downtown Chicago by taking the trains to the sky, which improved traffic flow below, which in turn, brought more prosperity. The Great Columbian Exposition of 1893 (aka "The World's Fair") transformed Chicago into the city we know and love today. Since then Chicago has gone on to become the third most populous city in the entire United States (New York City is #1, Los Angeles is #2) and is the largest city in the Midwest. Most

outsiders, me included, might succumb to three thoughts when hearing about Chicago: Mobsters (Al Capone and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre anyone?), Wind and Off-Broadway spectacles.



Of course, a younger set might immediately remember "Ferris Beuler's Day Off", a film which was set here in Chicago. Ooooooh, yeeeeaaaah. As seen in the film, Chicago is home to a number of world-class attractions. After settling into our hotel, the group of us attacked those attractions in two day-time affairs, centering on the Grand Park or "Loop" area of the city, such as the Buckingham Fountain, "the Bean", the Art Institute, MOSI and Field Museum.

Located at the intersection of Columbus Drive and Congress Parkway is one of Chicago's prestigious landmarks: Buckingham Fountain. Dedicated in 1927, this ornamented fountain was designed with sculptures by French Architect Jacques Lambert and modeled after the Latona Fountain at Versailles; it holds 1.5 million gallons of water, and can shoot that water 150 feet in the air, but that isn't what makes this particular landmark special. It was, in the past, the official starting point of the infamous US Route 66 that ran through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, terminating 2,448 miles later in Los Angeles. But perhaps most importantly for some members of my traveling group, Buckingham Fountain could be seen featured prominently in the title sequence of "Married... with Children", the FOX show starring Ed O'Neill and Katey Sagal as heads of a very dysfunctional Chicago-land household.

I bet you have the song in your head now.

"Love and Marriage... Love and Marriage... Go together like a horse and carriage. This I tell you brother... You can't have one without the other!"

Northward from the fountain you'll stumble into Millennium Park, as we did, and find two interesting items to explore: Cloud Gate and Cloud Fountain.

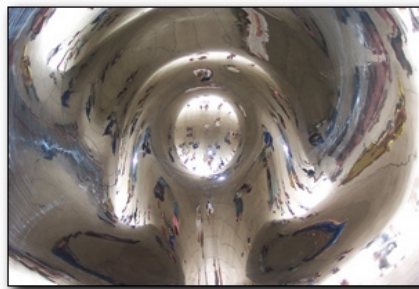
Designed by Catalan artist Jaume Plensa, the Cloud Fountain is a creature of pop-culture. Rather than existing as a normal stone fountain (Like Buckingham Fountain), it is by design a video projection unit. The whole ensemble is composed of a black granite reflecting pool with 50-foot tall glass towers on either end. Inside these towers are hundreds to thousands of little LEDs, which project images of people and when lit. While most enjoy the reflection pool for what it is (a nice place to cool your toes), stick around and watch the water cascade down the towers and spout off through a specially placed nozzle on the tower's front - you'll be treated to one wet kiss! It certainly draws a crowd.





British artist Anish Kapoor is responsible for Cloud Gate, the legume-like shaped sculpture that sits just a few feet away from the fountain. Over 160 highly polished and form-fitted stainless steel plates adorn this 33-foot by 66-foot by 42-foot structure, which also draws quite a crowd. One might say that a huge drop of mercury or two had been left on the city sidewalks when you gaze upon

it, but its construct makes for an interesting effect: most of Chicago's skyline warps around "the bean" (its nickname) in a stunning panorama. And don't forget to walk under this 100 ton structure for yet another interesting view: here is a concave chamber that warps your reflection into various multiple points of light. Check it out!



Also nearby is the Art Institute of Chicago, which unfortunately most of our group didn't get to, but I definitely want to the next time round, as the museum has a wonderful assortment of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and American paintings. Included as part of the Art Institute's collection are such works like: Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (by Georges Seurat; pictured top), Nighthawks (by Edward Hopper; pictured bottom), American Gothic (by Grant Wood; not pictured), Water Lilies (by Claude Monet; not pictured), The Basket of Apples (by Paul Cézanne; not pictured), and many other paintings. On other levels you'll find architectural works, furniture, armaments and armor, and even ceramics. It sounds like an interesting place to visit!



The Field Museum, or Chicago's Museum of Natural History, on the opposite end of Grant Park, is a wonderful place to learn a bit about everything relating to our planet. There are many wonderful and exciting permanent exhibit halls on location to explore, such as: the Grainger Hall of Gems, which features a huge assortment of diamonds and other gemstones from around the globe; the Underground Adventure, which nets you a bugs-eye view of the soil's biodiversity, a world we usually take for granted; Inside Ancient Egypt, which offers a glimpse into what daily life was like by touring an actual stone tomb; the Evolving

Planet, which visitors see both the history and evolution of life on Earth over a span of 4 billion years; and many plants and animals from all across the globe! However, amongst these halls you'll discover some real amazing items on display, like: Sixty-seven million year old Sue, the largest (at 42 feet long, 13 feet high) and most complete Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton currently known to exist (and so named after the paleontologist who found it - Sue Hendrickson); and the Lions of Tsavo, infamous man-eating lions from Kenya; and more!



The Field Museum was truly a fantastic stop, but it is by no means the only museum in this area. There are actually two others nearby - The Adler Planetarium and the Shedd Aquarium. Together they make up the Chicago Museum campus at the southern tip of Grant Park. Unfortunately I wouldn't get a chance to visit either on this trip, but I hear both are equally magnificent. Over at Adler you're presented with two planetary theaters and exhibits relating to

astronomical pursuits, and over at Shedd, you'll come face to face with over 25,000 fish in over 5-million gallons of water! So I really can't wait to return to Chicago to see these other two fine institutions.

The Museum of Science and Industry, or MOSI for short, was another destination in our line of must-see attractions for Chicago. If you ever wanted to get hands-on with your sciences, here is the place to do so. Many floors await your discovery with many interesting and quirky exhibits, such as: The Coal Mine, which re-creates a working deep-shaft bituminous mine complete with working coal train and track (it's quite dusty and dirty down there - and you might get stuck, like we did!); the U-505 German submarine, just one of two captured during WWII; Take Flight, which recreates a flight from San Francisco to Chicago using a real Boeing 727 jet plane (yes, an actual plane!); the Pioneer Zephyr, first diesel-powered stainless-steel passenger Train; the CM-103 Apollo 8 Command Module that took Borman, Lovell and Anders around the Moon in 1968, the pre-cursor to the landing that took place on Apollo 11 (spaceflight fans might remember two highlights from this mission: that of the crew reading the first ten verses from the Book of Genesis and of the now infamous "Earthrise" photo; and a plethora of naval memorabilia including a vast array of fighter planes (from both sides of WWII - a Zero, a Stuka dive-bomber and a Spitfire!)



It's a geeks dream...



I could talk forever about the things I saw and did in Chicago's downtown financial district, but my being there wasn't all about museums and attractions. Of course, eventually we had to get round to Cirque du Soleil, the reason we came to Chicago in the first place. Cirque du Soleil in Chicago is presented in the parking lot of the United Arena, a venue sports fans may recognize as the playing field of the Chicago Bulls, the team of former basketball

sensation Michael Jordan, to whom you can pay tribute to on the way (there's a statue of him right outside). But we didn't come here to admire "His Airness" we came to watch a Cirque show.

/// A CORTÈGE...

"So, what did you think about tonight's performance?"
"It was fantastic!"

I didn't lie to Kit. It really was a phenomenal performance, a much more solid and exciting one than the run in Montreal, with a much improved execution and sense of timing. There really wasn't much I could say that was negative about the performance - everything negative about Montreal had been shortened or removed entirely! The result was one of the best Cirque du Soleil shows to come out of the troupe in years; no lie!

Corteo, which draws its inspiration from "Cortège", the Italian word meaning pageant, most notably a funeral procession, is the tale of a clown who imagines his own funeral, as quirky as it may be. Situated in a mysterious place between heaven and earth, this carnival-like atmosphere (quietly watched over by caring angels) plunges the spectator into a theatrical world of juxtaposition between the large and the small, the happy and the sad, the fun and the mundane, and the ridiculous with the tragic, by highlighting the humanity that is within him and each of us: all our strengths and fragilities. And it's within this world that a number of high-class acrobatics are performed.

"What was the best part for you?"
"Your drumming, of course!"

Kit Chatham, Corteo's drummer extraordinaire, met up with us after the show for a little chat and behind-the-scenes peek of the Grand Chapiteau. Although his drumming was excellent, there was much more to the show I saw here that I liked... but a little flattery couldn't hurt though, right? After all, he was kind enough to stick around to meet up with a bunch of crazed Cirque fans after a hard earned rest, and he was, after all, a nice guy. But after his initial question had been answered, I began to reflect on the evening's performance to better compare it with the premiere and answer his question more in earnest.

Recalling Montreal, I ran down the list of acts in my head. There was Chandeliers (the Dead Clown's former lovers ascend to perform an aerial act), Bouncing on Beds (a trampoline number reminiscent of the clown's early childhood), Roue Cyr (a metal hoop of about 6 feet in diameter), Tightwire (a young woman dances across a tight-wire using point shoes, a unicycle, multiple hoops, and her bare feet), Juggling (four young artists performing fast-moving feats of prowess), Marionette (a live puppet evoking a beach scene from the clown's childhood), Valentyna's Flight (a small person takes flight over the audience), Teeterboard (three acrobats redefine teeterboard technique in an act where speed is rivaled only by complexity), Paradise (high-flying and bouncing on a Korean frame), Tibetan Bowls (a haunting melody on crystal glasses and a whistling virtuoso), Adagio Duet (a tender pas-de-deux performed by a duo of little people), Not-So-Serious Act (a manipulation act in which nothing goes right), Equilibriste (a ladder specialist trying desperately to reach the angel who is watching him from above), Teatro Intimo (a wild and zany version of "Romeo and Juliet"), and Tournik (an act which marries horizontal bar techniques with circus arts performed on a central cube-shaped structure).

"One of the best changes," I said as we were lead up on stage and through the entrance into the back stage area, "would have to be the removal of the 'Not-So-Serious' act and its replacement with 'Duo-Straps'".

Not-So-Serious was nothing less than a train wreck. At its heart it was a manipulation style act incorporating juggling and contortion in a presentation that was supposed to be a comical take on such cirque standards; however, it went on much, much too long and was so awkward that it didn't elicit much of a response from the francophone audience. At first no one knew whether to take it seriously, but when it turned toward the absurd (interrupted with a downpour of parachuting rubber chickens), we all got the joke. Unfortunately it just wasn't funny. The chickens on the other hand... to borrow a catchphrase from a bitter, cranky old anthropomorphic squirrel... now that's comedy!

It's replacement - Duo Straps. Duo Straps was a mesmerizing aerial duet using standard static straps to create one of the best aerial acts in Cirque du Soleil today. With its unique start - rising out of a red-lit and misted chasm in the stage - and with the poignancy of silks in Quidam to the emotions of the same in La Nouba, Dmytro Grygorov and Olesya Shulga present this graceful acrobatic performance as a testament to agility, balance, strength and, yes, tenderness. A fantastic addition to the show.

"I am happy to see that the chickens, which were the funniest part of the 'Not-So-Serious' act, did remain in the show."

Another merciful cut came with Teatro Intimo, a comedy routine featuring the Little Clown and Clowness (Grigor and Valenyna Paylevanyan) to which they present a stirring rendition of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" with the rest of the show's clown cast. It's not intended to be taken seriously and for the first few minutes it's actually quite amusing, unfortunately, however, the skit runs a bit long. The longer it runs the more monotonous it becomes, to the point of it losing its objective: which is to make us laugh. Thankfully the cast and crew understood this difficulty and trimmed the

performance's run-time by almost half! While still somewhat tedious at best, it at least packs up and moves on at the right time. And that's definitely something to be thankful for.

An addition to the rotation is Oleg Ouchakov and Evgeniya Astashkina's Acrobatic Duet. Also known as Acrobatic Pas-de-Deux, this performance is a beautiful choreographed dance that "glides through a series of acrobatic and artistic poses highlighting superior strength, balance, and rhythm." The last time I saw the act was at Varekai's premiere only then he was performing with Tatiana Gousarova (from the Ukraine). The act only lasted a year or so with the show, ending in 2003 after an unfortunate accident. While Tatiana would recover and later go on to dance with Oleg in Corteo, hers was only a limited run. The presentation here is similar to that in Varekai, with quick movements and quick drops to the stage floor fluttering hearts and keeping us on the edge of our seat.

"You know, I always thought it was an underrated act, poorly advertised, but it's a nice break from the everyday routine!"

The next thing I knew, we were fully backstage, surrounded by people in various states of undress, taking off their costumes, removing make up, watching videos of their performance, chatting, and rushing to catch the bus back to their hotel room (the bus ran only twice a night; once right after the show and the second an hour later). So, what goes on backstage at Corteo? To be honest, and as we saw, nothing different goes on here from any other Cirque du Soleil show. As Kit showed us around we ran into a number of personalities, such as Paul Bisson (Singer), Roger Hewett (Bandleader), Victorino Lujan ("The Giant" and yes, he is a big guy but all heart), Mauro Muzzani ("The Dead Clown", in passing), Sean Lomax ("The Loyal Whistler", who's quite a cool cat), and later on Grigor and Valenyna Paylevanyan (the little clown and clowness).

After taking our fill, and begging for autographs, we left Corteo as happy fans. As for myself, I left Corteo with a much better appreciation for the show and a connection with it, and its cast and crew that will never be broken. Now, how we got back to our hotel afterwards is another story...

* * *



Chicago is a one-of-a-kind city that I barely got to know while I was in town. Even though I saw and did a lot in the time I had, there's still much, much more to see do, such as: The Adler Planetarium, the Shedd Aquarium, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Navy Pier, Lincoln Park Zoo and take a trip up the Sears Tower for a panoramic view of the skyline. I can't wait to return!

Live to Cirque



SEPTEMBER 2006

« A Kaleidoscope of Imagination »

CirqueCon 2006: Las Vegas!

*The loudest call comes from far away.
Echoing across the desert, rebounding
off the canyons.
But crystal clear.
Once again we heed the voice...*



Thursday, September 21, 2006 – Sunday, September 24, 2006
Treasure Island | Las Vegas, Nevada (USA)

Las Vegas has been called everything from "Sin City" to the "City of Lights", but in two-thousand-six, after a brief but exciting detour north of the border, it finally became our special playground.

The CirqueCon team (of which I am a founding member) debated taking our band of passionates to Cirque's "flower in the desert" during the evening's Cocktail Hour at CirqueCon 2004, our very first event held in Vancouver, British Columbia. Salivating at the prospect of entertaining each of the shows, the location was all but decided by the time our glasses emptied. But then André Belanger, Internet Marketing Manager for Cirque du Soleil's operations in Quebec, who joined us there, had an intriguing offer: would we be interested in coming to Montréal for the premiere of the newest touring show (Corteo) instead? Would we?! Excited about the invitation and the new opportunities expressed therein, we took up the invite to jet off to Canada's French enclave, leaving the proposal of Las Vegas on the table. When Cirque announced the premiere of The Beatles: LOVE a few months later, it wasn't hard to decide where our next event would be held...

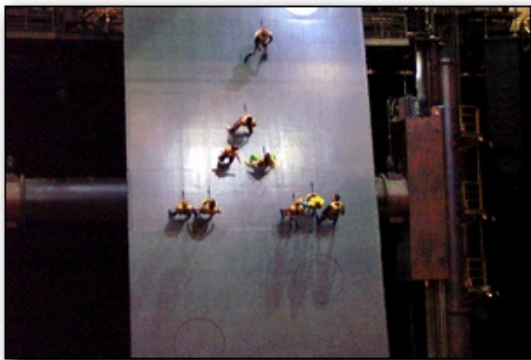
A long and winding road it took to get us there, though, but the journey undertaken more than paid off the blood, sweat and tears. Our membership body turned out quite an impressive showing too with approximately 200 people joining us in the desert, representing 22 of the 50 United States, 2 Canadian Provinces, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Scotland, England, and Australia. Truly an international convention of Cirque Passionates!

And a lifetime of unforgettable adventures awaited us.

/// THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21ST

We kicked off our exciting day down at the "City of Entertainment", the MGM Grand. Our fellowship gathered just outside the theater doors in a specially designed enclave of the casino and waited there with as much patience as they could muster. With acute levels of excitement in their steps, everyone rushed inside as soon as the doors parted, and reveled in the behind-the-scenes world Cirque du Soleil opened for us. And we never stopped moving from that moment on.

Activities in the KÀ Theater - We were beckoned inside by Nauticus, one of the show's costumed ushers, and lead to our seats in the central section of the upper tier, a little red-faced from the sidewalk sprint we undertook from the Mirage in the hot, hot sun. Nicole and I were late arrivals. We would have gotten there sooner, but a tiger at Siegfried and Roy's Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat saw fit to "pee" on me - marking his territory - so some emergency clean up was involved, but that's a funny anecdote for another time. As we settled in and caught our breath, Calum Pearson (Company Manager), Victoria Webb (Asst. Company Manager), and Stacey Myers (Stage Manager) invited all of us to watch the day's rehearsal of the grand battle scene that closes the show. For some of us it was our first introduction to KÀ's impressive technical conventions. The theater was certainly striking, even in elevated house lights; we just sat back and drank it all in.



The scene is the final no-holds-bars mêlée between the evil Archers and the Spearmen, played out on the enormous 25x50 foot Sand Cliff Deck. During the scene the deck is raised perpendicular to the ground (to face the audience), which poses a number of obvious problems, not least of which is: how do they simulate a battle inverted like that? The mechanics behind it, our friends told us as we watched, are achieved through the impressive

80,000 pound Sand Deck, which is supported and controlled by a gantry crane (a giant mechanical arm attached to four 75-foot long hydraulic cylinders) that can lift the deck up and down, rotate 360 degrees and tilt from flat to 110 degrees - all at the same time. It accomplishes this feat through the use of five 250hp pumps and a 3500 gallon oil reservoir. The performance itself is achieved by sixteen individual high-speed winches controlled through wireless remotes built into each costume. The scene is further intensified by video projections, triggered by the artists as they make contact with the battleground itself. Wrap it all up and you've got a stunning visual created in real three-dimensional space.

That's impressive!

After the hour-long rehearsal we were met by Matthew Salcedo and Erica Linz, acrobatic dancers and characters in the show, Julie McInnis, musician and singer, as well as chanteuse Beth Quist for a little chat session. Over the next hour or so they took our questions like troupers. Among many things, we wondered just how many people it took to run KÀ each night (it takes a team of 200; 100 to run the show and 100 maintenance people), how the performers kept from being impaled by the pegs in the climb scene (they're touch sensitive so they will retract if they sense contact), how artists move about the deck as it turns (there's a crawlspace within the huge structure, allowing artists to make their cues without falling off), how the projections in the battle scene are done (they're generated and then projected in real-time by the show's super computer) and what happened to the Pillars scene (it was removed in part because of injuries and to shorten the show's run-time). Once our group exhausted their line of questioning, the coaches, managers and theater staff began to ask questions of us. (Including, I might add, Sonya Padgett, correspondent for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, who wrote an article about us).



What a wonderful exchange of information between groups!

And before the curtain fell on our time with KÀ, our new friends gave us the rare opportunity to peek over the railing and into the void, the vast space filled with mechanisms dedicated to keeping the enormous tech of the show afloat.

Awesome!

Tapis Rouge @ Cirque RSD HQ - By early evening it was time for our traditional "Meet and Greet", an opportunity whereby our members get together and mingle with one another, receive their membership goodies if they hadn't done so at the registration tables earlier, and get to know us, the organizers, in a more relaxed, more intimate, less structured environment (and usually with a few regional nibbles too). Previous mixers were held out of our private hotel rooms to great success, but the swell of our membership body this year would prohibit that practice, making our usual plans impractical. After a number of weeks contemplating our options, and suitable location searches coming up empty, Cirque du Soleil came to our rescue by offering their

Resident Shows headquarters facility, located just a few miles off-Strip, as hosts. And not only were they willing to open their doors to a bunch of crazed fans, they planned to roll out the red carpet for us through auctions, raffles and other surprises!

Talk about Tapis Rouge!

To get there we hopped aboard the CirqueCon Magic Bus, a marvel idea spearheaded by fellow CirqueCon organizer Rich Alford, to shuttle approximately 200 people from the MGM Grand over to RSD headquarters (and back again) without a huge fuss and cost to us or our fellowship.

We're not sure who first coined the term, whether it was one of our conceptors or one of our passionates, but the name soon became synonymous with the effort and before long we had ourselves a party! The party atmosphere continued right inside the RSD-HQ. The spread of food and drink they had for us was unbelievable. Finger foods and other scrumptious hors d'œuvres fanned out from multiple colorful displays, including salads and vegetable trays, meat and cheese trays and, of course, a decadent desert tray full of chocolate goodies. Yum! A full liquor bar was on tap, should a nosh or two be desired, but water and sodas of all kinds were also available to quench our thirst.



While we nibbled on our tapas, Cirque RSD gave us limited free reign of the hallways and rooms on the floor, which had an amazing assortment of Cirque du Soleil history on display through art and artifacts. Posters from around the world, such as Quidam in Scandinavia, London, and Spain; Alegría celebrating 2000th and 2500th performances; and Saltimbanco in Japan, Europe and USA hung throughout the offices, hallways and conference rooms. Original full-color character sketches from Zumanity were pinned up on a display board, giving us a tantalizing glimpse into the sensual side of Cirque du Soleil. And full-body costumes from "O" and Mystère (the Comet and Bungee artists respectively) were on display in acrylic cases, hung triumphantly here and there. As well as many various original works of art.

Throughout the evening Cirque RSD also held a number of raffles and silent auctions containing amazing original artwork, cast-signed show posters, and a variety of Cirque merchandise packages personally created and donated by artists, technicians and other members of the Cirque du Soleil staff in Las Vegas for us to bid on, with proceeds benefiting Street Teens (an organization dedicated to help youth at risk). Booths highlighting the prizes were set up in the RSD physio department, a rather long room usually filled with work out equipment, massage tables and various other physical accoutrements, which we were able to use as mingle space. And it was quite fun! All told we raised almost \$6000 for Street Teens, which was well beyond their expectations.

We were even surprised by warm welcomes from Jerry Nadal, Vice-President of Resident Shows, and Michael Bolingbroke, Senior VP of Live Shows for all of Cirque du Soleil.

Wow!

Group Show: "O" - By 9:00pm, we reluctantly bid farewell to our hosts at RSD Headquarters, as the hour came to re-board the bus and journey to "O" at Bellagio. But before we said our final goodbyes, Mr. Bolingbroke heard ("a little bird told me...") that we fancied ourselves experts in all things Cirque, so he tasked the group with a little bit of homework. Our assignment, which was due at the end of the week, was to correctly answer five questions about the company and its artists. The passionate who answered the most questions correctly would receive a special VIP package to attend a premiere anywhere in the world, which included show tickets, Tapis Rouge treatment, and an invite to the after-show party for themselves and their immediate family. Each of us thought we had this in the bag until he began to read the questions off to us. They were really tough!

1. What is the most commonly injured body part for Cirque du Soleil artists?
2. What country does not allow Cirque du Soleil to fly their national flag? What does Cirque fly in its place?
3. What 8 cities in the world has Cirque du Soleil visited and sold over 200,000 tickets in a single run?
4. What is the house number shown next to the front door on the clown house in "O"?
5. How many artists are there in "O" AND how many of them are required to be NAUI/PADI certified?

While we'd all get the answers a few weeks after our weekend (look for them at the end of this article), we all looked at each other dumbfounded. How would we answer these questions in just 48 hours? We got a crack at two of them though, as our group took in the late show of "O". Hearing the murmur of our crowd as the front door of the clown house came floating into view was quite something. I'm sure the audience was wondering what on earth was going on!

Then again we had energy to spare. At first it seemed the cast and crew of "O" didn't quite know what to make of us. We were loud, but respectful, and ready for a good time. As soon as the performers stepped on the stage and heard our reactions you could see it in their faces: this was not going to be a normal show for them. They were just as excited as we were and prepared to take their performance to the next level, and beyond.

And they did!



Activities in the "O" Theater - Building on the excitement from the fantastic performance we were given, we all met poolside following the show. There Dawn Bradley, Theater Manager, and her wonderful support staff were on hand ready to continue our amazing Cirque adventure. No sooner did they have us corralled a number of performers, still costumed (and dry!), made their way out from behind the curtain. We were expecting no more than 5 or 6 artists, out of costume and weary of a group as large and as rowdy as ours, but when a good portion of the cast showed up to greet us, it was we who were intimidated! Standing those few feet apart eyeing one another were anxious moments indeed, with both sides unable to move or exchange more than quick pleasantries.



An announcement inviting us all up on stage for a group photo with the cast and crew was all it took to break the wall of tension between us. Members excitedly bounded on stage, myself included, to mix and mingle with the lot of performers: a Comet, Eugen, a Zebra or two, Guifa, Horsey Guy, a few dancers, a couple of the Batteau artists, one of the contortionists, the Transvestite and the clowns (aye, aye, aye!). Soon thereafter the words came, and hugs, and handshakes, and smiles and laughter - from both sides! We melted into one big happy family, with stories to tell, questions to ask (they were just as curious about us as we were about them), and photos of our journey to take. No longer were we spectator or performer, ordinary or extraordinary; we had all become Saltimbanques, honorary members of the circus troupe. It's one of those "you just had to be there" moments to fully appreciate, you know?

The moment we were all waiting for came a few minutes after - time for a little dip in the "O" pool. Cirque du Soleil lowered the massive lifts governing the pool's stage just enough to let the contents bubble up through the porous structure - suddenly there was water lapping at our feet! We wouldn't be allowed to swim laps in the pool, of course, so instead Cirque du Soleil gave each and every one of us specially-labeled screw-top vials so that we could take a little bit of "O" home with us. Passionates bent down in drove to touch the warm liquid stage and collect its life-giving waters within. It was a wonderful cap to an amazing night; it was all we could do not to "fall in" by mistake! (Wouldn't that have been a hoot?)



Now how cool was that? And that's just the first day!

/// FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22ND

After the amazing late-night evening with Cirque du Soleil, very few of us had the energy to be up as bright and early with the west-coast sun. When we did recover it was just about time for lunch. That turned out to be perfect because another of our traditions is the Group Meal, whereby members gather with other Cirque Pasionates to "eat, drink and talk of our shared passions". Once again our size prevented the more intimate settings we shared in years past but we had that covered too - the Treasure Island, our host hotel, had a unique solution that we just couldn't pass up: vouchers for their buffet and a courted off section just for us! But there was definitely much more to come...

Activities in the Mystère Theater - Following our lunch at the Dishes buffet, the group descended upon the Mystère Theater and boutique to begin the day's activities. Bob MacDonald (Company Manager) and Jeff Lund (Asst. Company Manager) were there to greet us and, like at KÀ the previous day, to answer all our pressing questions about Cirque du Soleil, the show at large, and anything else under the soleil we could think to ask (as I stated previously, we are an inquisitive bunch).



As we interacted with our speakers, a Chinese Poles artist was prepping for integration, a term used to describe the introduction of a new performer into the matrix of the show. Today she was working through the various cues she'd need to hit prior to taking on the apparatus, and the moves she'd need to make once she took to it. Integration is an arduous process undertaken for both the quality of the show and

the mental health of the performer, and thus is important for both. For obvious reasons you wouldn't want to place someone out on stage who is not used to being the center of attention and/or who hasn't had enough time practicing in front of a live audience. Nor would you want a performer out there who couldn't keep up the integrity of the scene. So while it may seem like over-kill to gradually introduce a new persona to the cast, it's really for the best.

It was really difficult to know who to focus on: her or the general manager!

I ended up watching the artist's integration work so I missed hearing most of the Q&A, but I did overhear a response or two; it was interesting to learn the technical staff poured a mixture of common tap water and Coca Cola on the stage every night to keep it sticky. And speaking of sticky, did you know that a sticky substance is applied to the Chinese Poles each performance to give better traction to its performers? Although I'm not sure what that does to their costumes. Between 400 and 500 costume pieces are laundered each day, excluding weekly dry-cleaning and daily hand-washing. So, I would imagine these would be in the hand washing category.



Alas, she wasn't the only one out there practicing. A couple of the bungee artists were trying in vain to do their famous mid-air grab, a move by which the artists project themselves towards each other, loop around and come back together from opposite ends, but just couldn't make it work. A few moments before we left for our next activity they made another attempt... and nailed it. They got copious amounts of applause from us and I'd like to think we helped them along in some small way.



Group Show: "LOVE" - A few short hours later we were over at the Mirage getting ready for LOVE, the Beatles / Cirque du Soleil fusion we all came to Las Vegas to see. Using the techniques that Sir George Martin pioneered in the sixties, linked to the best technology of today, Sir George and his son Giles spent two years combining every facet of The Beatles recordings - from full tracks to small snippets of conversation - to create a unique, groundbreaking soundscape of original Beatles music for the show. And it was truly sensational.

An idea of just what the Martins had created for LOVE can be imagined in their new version of 'Drive My Car', which incorporates the horns from 'Savory Truffle' while seamlessly placing 'What You're Doing' and 'The Word' over its groove for a "beep-beep, beep-beep, yeah!" finish; or perhaps the Eastern-trance melody from 'Within You Without You' atop the psychedelic drone of 'Tomorrow Never Knows'; or by placing 'Octopus's Garden' over 'Goodnight', ending 'Strawberry Fields Forever' with 'Hello Goodbye' and spinning 'Sun King' backwards, might give you some hint.

Dominic Champagne, who directed and wrote the original concept of the show, explained his vision for LOVE as: "I wanted to create a Beatles experience rather than a Beatles story, taking the audience on an emotional journey rather than a chronological one, exploring the landscapes and experiences that have marked the group's history." I'd say they hit it spot on. It was such a fun, psychedelic ride from the opening on the roof-top with 'Get Back' to the finale song proclaiming 'All You Need is Love', I was just blown away. I knew of the Beatles going in, enjoyed many of their hits throughout the years, but never had a true appreciation for the band until the end of this night. Dominic and Gilles and the entire cast of LOVE turned out an amazing show, one that touched my heart and opened my eyes to new forms of expression and new forms of enjoyment. I would never be the same again. Goo goo ga joob!



Immediately following the presentation we stayed in our seats to await the change-over between shows with a member of the artistic staff to explain what was taking place. Many of us, who were still entranced by the sights and sounds of the Beatles, were content to sit there and just take it all in. Unfortunately, the crew at the Mirage was not so well inclined. We were unceremoniously dismissed! Wait, what? Correct, we were told unequivocally to leave the theater as soon as possible - can you believe that? So we did. It was later learned that Tom Cruise was in the house, which was a point of stress for the security folks, and that a patron required the emergency services of an ambulance, so their already tight turn-over schedule was affected and their focus could no longer be on us. Understandable situation for sure, but perhaps advising us of that before kicking us out would have been a better way. We let our displeasure be known, but it wouldn't break our spirits. Nothing would.

Group Show: "Mystère" - Our displeasure over the treatment received at LOVE reached the staff at Mystère even before we did, leaving them quite concerned and hastily prepared for the onslaught of negativity. But little came. Quick to apologize as they were, we were as equally ready to say it wasn't their fault; we still loved them, and were looking forward to a whiz-bang experience that night. They didn't disappoint. The crew at Mystère more than made up for the losses at LOVE, turning out a high-stakes, high-energy show that was totally flawless, and in the process, granted the wish of one of our passionates life-long endeavors: to be Bébé Francois' Papa. Although Francois Dupuis did not perform his famous character in our viewing of Mystère (the girl baby did), it in no way diminished the experience - Rich was not disappointed one bit. He took to the role with glee, literally jumping out of his seat when the baby's big red ball came to him, flying up the stairs when she came to get him in the golf cart, and wearing that baby bonnet with pride.



It was Rich's night. We were all pulling for him!

Once again we were alerted to stay in our seats after the show for a little something special. Here, like for "O", we would assemble on stage for a group photo with a handful of Mystère's wonderful cast members. Brian Le Petit's stand in, the baby girl, the Firebird (played by Ross Gibson), and one of the bungee artists we found practicing the mid-air grab earlier in the day, had turned out to join us. But unlike "O", there was no trepidation on our parts (or theirs!) about meeting, greeting and chatting with our new friends. They were so gracious with us too, taking time out of their busy schedules (and staying much later than normal) to be with a bunch of crazed Cirque fans. We all piled up on the Mystère stage with Alice the snail for an amazing photograph of the entire group, then took turns for individual pictures of the cast before calling it an evening.

It was fantastic!



/// SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD

Although today's activities would be the culmination of CirqueCon's efforts with Cirque du Soleil, there were still a number of exciting experiences coming up throughout the day to keep us occupied. We started off down at New York-New York with activities at the Zumanity theater, which we would follow up with another double-dipping of Cirque's shows: KÀ and Zumanity.

Activities in the Zumanity Theater

- Zumanity's concept is probably one of the greatest experiments of the brand to come out of Montréal in quite a number of years. The newest show The Beatles: LOVE notwithstanding. Combining elements of the cabaret with the sensuality of human sexuality and you wind up with this eclectic mix of raw eroticism - blending dance movement, acrobatics and beautiful bodies with the sensual caress of the human voice and the pulse of exotic rhythms, for an exploration

that awakens the most primal urges in us all. We filed into our seats near the thrust of the stage, filling in the plush couches, twin sofas and theater chairs present looking quizzically at the equipment set up before us. A large projection screen sat near the edge of the circular thrust, flanked on either side by two make-up chairs, and a small make-shift table with a mirror adorned with lights affixed to the back.



As it turned out, the setup was to help us understand the undercurrents present in the world of this human zoo. Kathy Merachnik (Company Manager), Tim Robinson (Asst. Co. Mgr), and Sharean McVay (Production Assistant), with the aid of artists Joey Arias and Vanessa Convery, converged and met with us while unveiling the secrets behind the stunningly outrageous costumes and make-up designs in the show.

And while we watched a number of highly entertaining and very informative video projections (these folks really out did themselves here at Zumanity), Joey and Vanessa transformed before our eyes through the application of their sensational hair and make-up and sexy costumes. When their new personas were revealed to us, we let out a huge gasp: their transformation was simply stunning! No longer were Joey Arias and Vanessa Convery standing before us - the Mistress of Seduction and a voluptuous pole dancer, our guides into the hedonistic world which they emceed, stood before us in their place. The biggest kicker: how much their true personas changed to match their character!

But all too soon our time with Zumanity came to an end. Each of us got a chance to pose with Joey and Vanessa in the theater's lobby for a quick picture or two before we bid them adieu, which was quite a treat (and a lot of fun for both parties). Fortunately the group would get another chance to meet and mingle with the cast in a mixer set up for us in the lobby of the show's plush theater after the evening show, which unfortunately I could not attend (as I did not attend that viewing of Zumanity). But KÀ was phenomenal - completely different than I had expected - and as it was my first you just couldn't go wrong with that.



We definitely ended the event on a high note. Wouldn't you say?

Cirque's Resident Show division went above and beyond rolling out the red carpet for us, surprising and exciting our members with remarkable, unprecedented access to their theaters, artists and managers. For that we truly thank them. Without their efforts CirqueCon 2006 wouldn't have been the special event it was. But even in the light of the immense amount of behind-the-curtain access to Cirque du Soleil we received in Las Vegas, the most important factor in the event's success was our fellowship - our friends and family we met here in Vegas. Without their belief and participation in the concept of CirqueCon, there wouldn't be a Las Vegas adventure.

And the magic continues...

What happens here...

Living. Passionately.

...Will be remembered forever.

And we will experience it.

Together.



APRIL 2007

« Kooza Unveiled »

Previews on the Quays of Montréal

Strangely enough, the email to the right is how my journey to Koozâ, then known only as Cirque2007, began.

It was Friday morning, February 9th and for some reason I checked the availability for tickets and noticed something: seats were being sold the week before the announced premiere date of April 26th. Say what?

TO: RICH ALFORD
FROM: RICHASI
SUBJECT: OMG!!

"Cirque du Soleil pushed up the public premiere of Cirque2007 by a week, now it's going to premiere on Thursday, June 19th. Tickets are available for the 20th and 21st - do you wanna go?!?!"

Prior to that moment I had debated about and decided against making the trek up to Montréal for this particular premiere. Having been in town for Varekai's opening in 2002 and Corteo's launch in 2005, I felt I could miss Koozâ's and catch it further on down the road, in Toronto perhaps (for its filming). Coming off of a very expensive, but also very exciting and rewarding CirqueCon 2006 in Las Vegas (where by we took in all five Cirque du Soleil shows, but prior to I also went out to Disneyland, Hollywood and San Francisco for the first time, and that placed a number of added dollars to the bill), I didn't think my finances could handle another journey so soon.



Be that as it may, the moment that new week of preview performances opened up, I couldn't resist. I sent an email to my friend and fellow CirqueCon organizer with that revelation and a simple question - "Do you wanna go?" Why, yes, of course! I immediately purchased tickets for the shows in question, coordinated a hotel room at the Springhill Suites (the CirqueCon 2005 HQ Hotel) and then purchased my flight, all within about an hour or so (and Rich on the phone frantically excited about the whole ordeal).

It all happened so quickly that I felt a little dizzy (or was that just the adrenaline pumping excitement into my veins?). Never before had everything fallen into place so quickly; it was as if Koozâ in Montréal was meant to be.

And it was fantabulous!

Koozå was such an amazing show, full of high-energy, high-caliber specialty acts from across the world. Their execution kept us on the edge of our seats and then some!

In many ways Koozå is a back-to-basics show for Cirque du Soleil, shedding the pretentiousness and over abundance and reliance on automation and sophistication that has plagued some of its more recent offerings, to bring the performance (and excitement there of) back to the forefront. To that end Koozå stresses acrobatics and death-defying stunts over subtleness and artistry, and I'm totally okay with that. It's about time Cirque du Soleil has a little fun again under the big top. And Koozå is just that - one hell of a fun ride!

* * *

From the moment Rich and I walked into the Grand Chapiteau, we sensed an acute excitement in the air. The weather outside, while turning cool, continued to stay beautiful. The skies had been clear all day, the sun perched and burning high in the sky, kept the temperatures very mild. The evening followed the same design, the moon and stars shining brightly overhead, the breezes light and airy, teasing the flags on top of the Grand Chapiteau over and



over and over again. What a complete contrast from Corteo's premiere just two short years prior. In addition to the cold then, it rained off and on, creating a dark, damp, gloomy atmosphere that, in retrospect, probably helped Corteo's theme get off the ground (it is, after all, about the funeral of a clown). It just didn't make for an exciting night. I prefer a happier atmosphere, which translates into happier spectators!

We had just walked into the Koozå big top and found our seats when I noticed a number of white signs with official looking Cirque du Soleil logos splashed about all around us, affixed to the folding chairs as if to say SOMEONE IMPORTANT WILL BE SITTING HERE - GO AWAY! "I wonder what's going on here," I asked, tapping my friend and fellow Cirque fan, Rich Alford, on the shoulder, pointing the signs out to him. He didn't know anymore than I did, so we stood around our seats, contemplating who might be sitting around us. While we watched intently, no one out of the ordinary sat around us and we didn't really recognize anyone in particular, until... well, I'll get to that in a little bit.

Koozå, whose name is inspired by the Sanskrit word "koza," meaning "box," "chest" or "treasure," tells the story of a melancholy loner (The Innocent) in search of his place in the world and through his

search we are taken on a journey through strength, fragility, laughter, turmoil and harmony. Koozå also represents a return to the origins of Cirque du Soleil. It combines two circus traditions - acrobatic performance and the art of clowning - to tell its tale and in the process give us those thrills and chills.



"KOOZA is about human connection and the world of duality, good and bad," says the show's writer and director David Shiner. "The tone is fun and funny, light and open. The show doesn't take itself too seriously, but it's very much about ideas, too. As it evolves we are exploring concepts such as fear, identity, recognition and power." There are ten (10) different specialty acts collected here for our enjoyment, presented in two distinct halves. The first consists of Charivari (a general cacophonous introduction), Contortion, Solo Trapeze, Duo Unicycle and Double High-Wire. The Wheel of Death opens the second half, followed with

Pickpocket, Juggling, Balancing on Chairs and Teeterboard.

Along the way we are introduced to a number of characters, such as: The Innocent (a naïve and child-like loner who yearns for more in life), the Trickster (a charming yet sophisticated chap who seems to be in control of this incredible, magical world), the Clowns (a King and his slap-happy Fools), a Pickpocket (watch your pockets, mates!), a nutty Dog (who pees on people) and Heimloss (a strange robot in charge of Koozå's mechanical machinery down below the depths).

As the stage lights rise, we find The Innocent at play with his kite, attempting to get it aloft. When a courier interrupts to bring him a rather large-sized package ("Delivery for Mr. Innocent!"), things turn mysterious - he's not expecting a package. The parcel is a peculiar box, strangely festooned and ornamented, with no return address on hand. Mr. Innocent runs his hands over and pokes at the chest, which opens - the devilish Tickster bursts onto the scene like a jack-in-a-box! He produces a magical wand that, with the flick of a wrist, illuminates the world of Koozå and places its machinery in motion. The lights come up, the Bataclan comes into motion and the music begins to play in earnest. He really get's things moving!

Or, at least that's how it's supposed to happen.

Unfortunately, just prior to the start of preview performances, Jason Berrent and his understudy replacement were injured practicing the character's maneuvers. Jason was injured right out of the box while his replacement pulled a tendon in one of the character's dances. Since the character is important to the overall presentation of the show, Ross Gibson (Red Bird in *Mystère*) was asked to fill-in at the last minute, but he did not have time to become fully integrated into the show for the first week's previews, so this cue was left out. The innocent still got us going, however, and once we began moving, we did not stop!

The show burst into action with the house troupe in Charivari, a cacophony of acrobatics, song, and movement. Using small trampolines

imbedded in the stage, the house troupe jumped, bounced and flew to create a whimsical world for The Innocent to enjoy. But they also showed off their various skills by forming human pyramids of various sizes and numbers, manipulating Dralions, and generally running amok. The act culminated with the "Crash Bash", a daring dive into a circle of fabric inspired by traditional Inuit game of blanket toss, which event got the Innocent in on the act.

The music is heavy on brass and while I'm not musically inclined (so there's not much I can say about it, other than it pops), I really love it! It's a nice combination of Indian themes, American Jazz, Brass and even House beats. We also got our first fully lit glimpse of the Bataclan, the traveling tower at center that moves to change the dimension of the performance space. The Bataclan's ornamentation is inspired by Hindu culture, Pakistani buses and Indian jewelry and very much looks the part. It serves as the bandstand as well as a curtain/doorway, and is flanked by two curved staircases that allow characters of all walks of life access to its crown. The giant fabric structure surrounding the Bataclan (the "Void") can be opened and closed like the petals of a flower, or flapped like the enormous wings of a bird of prey, just by using ropes and pulleys. In fact, much of the Koozâ set/stage structure is devoid of automation - by design. I applaud the simplicity, and it's so beautiful when lit! Sparkling in their gold-laden costumes, three young contortionists take the stage next to bend themselves in ways unimaginable; they are absolutely on top of their game. Julie Bergez, Natasha Patterson and Dasha Sovik perform a set unmatched anywhere inside or outside of Cirque du Soleil. What these girls can do with their bodies is simply mind-blowing. And when Dasha performed a round-the-world leg-walk, the big-top went nuts!



As the bendable sisters slowly slide off-stage, the house troupe marched to the forefront in a 1-2-3-4 pyramid arrangement, reminiscent of a bowling pin setup - and that's just what they were. One of the clowns came out proceeded to throw the frame. The "pins" fell to reveal seventeen year old Darya Vintilova, solo trapezist from the Ukraine. Strongly invoking a bad-girl image, Darya is all rock and roll in this act. She struts about the stage, teasing the audience (and the Trickster) with her raw femininity, before grabbing up her trapeze bar and taking to the skies. Instead of facing forward, her trapeze flies side-to-side (from stage-left to stage-right) which affords a very unique view of a very traditional circus solo trapeze set.

Yury Shavro and Diana Aleshchenko take the stage next in an exceptional and highly pleasing unicycle act that is part dance and part acrobatics, but all heart. Yury and Diana begin their pas-de-deux slowly before picking up the pace for a real acrobatic treat - the manipulation of Diana over Yury's head and on his shoulders while he continues to pedal. My enjoyment of their performance was not expected, but their playful attitude and obvious skill won me over. I very much loved their performance!





Angel Quiros, Angel Villarejo, Vicente Quiros, and Roberto Quiros (The Dominguez's from Spain) laid siege to the high-wires next, taking to them with ease. The brothers skipped and danced across as if they had forgotten they were twenty-five plus feet from the ground without a safety net. A point we became acutely aware when Vicente attempted a jump over, missed, and just managed to catch the wire to avoid

breaking his neck! But in true showmanship form, he reset and did it again - landing the jump perfectly! Then the boys assembled a narrow moving platform in the sky for Vicente to play on. And if we weren't all hyperventilating by that point, he stood on it, balanced, took a chair, and balanced on it. The tension in the audience was so thick who could breathe? He then eased himself back down in the seat and crossed his legs in defiance. Oh my god! Before they could climb down from the rafters the audience was on their feet giving the first standing ovation of the night (and first I've ever seen *during* a show). These guys were simply phenomenal!

By the time Heimloss, the little robot under the stairs, er, I mean, stage, popped up to announce Intermission, we were in desperate need of a breather. Certainly thirty-minutes would give our palpitating hearts a chance to come down from their highs and regulate, no?

The second-half opened on the Wheel of Death, with the help of the Innocent, who uses the magical wand he recovered from the Trickster to kick-start the show. But while the Trickster commands control over the powers residing within the wand, the Innocent does not and unleashed hell on earth - literally. Personages, skeleton clad, take the stage and along with Death, dance a burlesque waltz



reminiscent of a Las Vegas Showgirl review (complete with feathered skeleton show girls!). As soon as we're done "dancing the Koozå", the skeletons began their own brand of boogie, click-clacking their bones to announce their arrival, and that of the next number.



Continuing the theme, Carlos Enrique Marin Loaiza and Jimmy Ibarra Zapata (from Columbia) appear defiantly on stage, now doused in reds, with devilish horns. They take to the 1600 pound Wheel of Death that had up until that time hung insolently at the top of the Grand Chapiteau, and rotate the contraption at heart-stopping speeds. While we just had a thirty minute intermission to catch our breaths, it was quickly taken from us as the guys walked, ran, skipped and played inside - and OUTSIDE - the metallic rings. You know, I thought I would see performers die at the end of Varekai when they turned the Russian Swings to face each other and then began to jump between them, but I was most

certain one of these guys were gonna fall off the Wheel of Death here.

I could only watch through slit fingers - especially when the one guy's foot caught on the rope he was jumping and made him trip! Alas (and thankfully), they lived but damn what nail-biting those few minutes were. We all had to stand and applaud just to shake off the adrenaline!

Thankfully we're allowed yet another breather as Michael Halvarson, Koozå's only criminal-clown, takes to the stage and preys upon an unsuspecting spectator. As he's talking to them (tonight a guy in a suit), he's stealing their watches, wallets, phones, belts, papers, keys - you name it, he's getting it. And he throws in a couple of gags here and there too, such as finding a condom or two and a baggie full of Viagra. To add insult to injury, as he's giving back his bounty, he's untying the audience member's neck-tie, and slips it off unawares. He's quite a hoot and good too!

Anthony Gatto and his lovely assistant Danielle (who is also his lovely wife) rush on stage next to liven things up a bit, appearing in a costume that makes him look like a moving disco ball! Anthony is a juggling prodigy. He's the only juggler in the world to have been awarded the Golden Clown of Monte Carlo, a highly prestigious performance award, and he holds or shares a few juggling records, such as: the most rings juggled and caught (at least twice) and the most clubs juggled. Besides rings and clubs, Anthony is also a whiz at balls, juggling up to nine! Here he juggles all three from hand-to-hand, from arc-to-arc and into home-built props and other receptacles. Quite simply, he's earned the title of being "the best in the world." Oh yeah, we gave him a standing ovation too!

Zhang Gongli, dressed in nothing but muscles and a loin cloth, took over and calmed things down (except, perhaps, for the hearts of the ladies and gay men in the audience). His act is as simple as it gets: eight chairs and a pedestal, but what he uses them for will amaze you; it did us! Over the course of a few minutes, Gongli stacks the chairs at an ever increasing height (up to 23-feet from the stage floor) to bend and flex his impressively toned body for us. There's nothing flashy about his performance, just a slow mount and dismount and a wonderful stage presence. Gongli has one of the best all around artistic performances in Koozå.



Last but not least, the show comes to its final number with the Korean Plank. Once again the house troupe takes to the stage to bounce off of something, this time a teeterboard. With it they fly skyward, twisting and flipping in triple, quadruple, and quintuple somersaults! And like all the other acts in Koozå, the troupe kicked it up a notch by strapping stilts to their legs and letting loo-oo-ooo-oose! Totally high energy and totally crowd pleasing - we were up on our feet before they could make their final landing!

Our time in the Trickster's land came to a close shortly thereafter, once again leaving us with the Innocent and his attempts to catch his Kite on a spit of wind. Only this time it catches and climbs high, high, high in the sky filling the Innocent with pure child-like wonder.

What a fantastic show!

* * *

Our after-show activities were just as exciting.



On the first night, we met up with Wayne Leung, friend, Cirque fan, and previous writer on Fascination, who was also in the house that night, or should I say, under the big top. As we congregated around the "GO AWAY" seats around us, talking about the excitement of the show, what we liked and disliked, Wayne was the first to recognize Jason Berrent, Trickster, (and his trainer) who just so happened to be sitting behind us. Naturally we didn't miss a chance to speak with him (or get photos!), and even though we probably acted like crazed fans, he was quite

gracious and understanding. We wished him a speedy recovery before they kicked us out for the evening. And after one last look-see through the store, we were outside, wandering around the site in an attempt to obtain night shots of the Grand Chapiteau.

Mission success; what do you think? The daytime ones were better, I think.



The next night was even wilder.

The second night we were on the lookout for any Cirque du Soleil creative alumni, such as Guy Laliberte, Gilles Ste-Croix, or even the show's director himself. Unfortunately we were seated at opposite ends of the Grand Chapiteau, so Rich and I were not able to kibitz during the show, but that didn't detract us from making our comments heard. We just simply met up at Intermission! Having had a chance to flip through the pseudo programme book and see the faces of the show's creators, we were better informed now about who we were looking for. Standing around we spotted a couple of the creators - Clarence Ford (Choreographer), Benoit Mathieu (Production Manager) and Marie-Chantal Vaillancourt (Costume Designer) amongst others.

"Wouldn't it be crazy if we saw David Shiner here?" I said, trying to identify more of the show's creators, when...

"Rich, there he is..."

It was Mr. Shiner, clown extraordinaire, in the flesh, although in his jacket and hat you might have been hard-pressed to even notice it was him. David Shiner is a theatrical director, film and stage actor, and performance creator, but he is probably best known as a simple, humble clown. He got his start as a street mime in Paris, according to his biography, and watched his career take off after the Cirque de Demain festival in 1984. He came to the Cirque in 1990's Nouvelle Expérience and performed his classic improv-based mock silent-movie melodrama there. A routine for which he is fondly remembered and one I enjoyed time and time again.

As Rich and I stood there thinking of ways to get his attention, we settled upon just walking by as if we were about to take our seats. Maybe he would notice us instead. It worked! He spotted Rich's bright yellow home-made t-shirt with the Koozå poster inked on the front, pointed at it and smiled. When we got nearby he came down to us and asked if we were fans of the Cirque. Naturally, of course, we responded, and began trading questions. How was the show creation process coming along? Have you been a fan of the Cirque long? Has Guy been supportive? Where did you get that T-shirt? And so on and so forth. Naturally we gushed about the show (we really did enjoy it!) and couldn't wait to see more. He excused himself a few minutes later - he was there for a reason after all - but not before we could give him a little memento to remember us by. Well, okay, that Rich gave him: one of his home-pressed Koozå buttons. Not only did he think the world of it, it immediately pinned it to his jacket!

It was truly a wonder to meet him.

Now that's living to Cirque.

Live to Cirque



AUGUST+ 2007

« Once Upon a Time... »

CirqueCon 2007: Orlando!

*Begin a Tale
With a Breath I Inhale
And Cast a Spell
Use the Words to Propel...*

Thursday, August 9, 2007 – Sunday, August 12, 2007
Walt Disney World | Orlando, Florida (USA)



For the fourth time we gather, this year in the heart of the “Sunshine State” - Orlando, Florida, USA. You are but one of the untold thousands upon thousands of visitors that inundate this city every day to visit Florida's beaches, its theme parks and to enjoy the state's iconic weather. So let me, a resident of this fantastic state, and one of the thousand thousands that live here, be the first to welcome you to my home and playground.

Before leaving Vancouver (2004), the CirqueCon team (of which I am a founding member) decided Montréal would be the next destination for our yearly event; before leaving Montréal, it was announced that Las Vegas would be the home of CirqueCon 2006. But after that hugely successful event we were stumped – where to next? *CirqueCon 2006: Las Vegas* was by and large an enormous success from both a planning and an execution standpoint, and from an attendance and awesomeness factor. Duplicating the success and surpassing the achievements of such an event would be a monumental undertaking, to say the least, if it could even be done at all. So, after taking some time to research our options for the 2007 season (such as returning to Montréal for the premiere of *Koozâ*, or traveling to Toronto for *Koozâ*'s filming), we hit upon a winning idea: Orlando.

Orlando, Florida was chosen due to its designation as a world-class destination, for its world-renown theme parks (especially Walt Disney World, of which I am a huge fan), its warm weather, and because it's the only place you can find Cirque du Soleil's only other resident show (at present) outside of Las Vegas: *La Nouba*! By merging the playful atmosphere of a world-class theme park and our passions for Cirque du Soleil, what better location to hold such an event than at Walt Disney World? We'll "live it up" in the sun and have a *zippity-du-soleil* time!

Over fifty Cirque du Soleil passionates joined us at this new place to party, to live it up. And while these numbers may not sound as impressive as the 190+ folks who joined us in Las Vegas; despite the contrast I found the group in the attendance this year was a great bunch, fantastic and very enthusiastic! It really was a wonderful, intimate gathering of friends!

And it was a whirlwind weekend that none of us would soon forget.

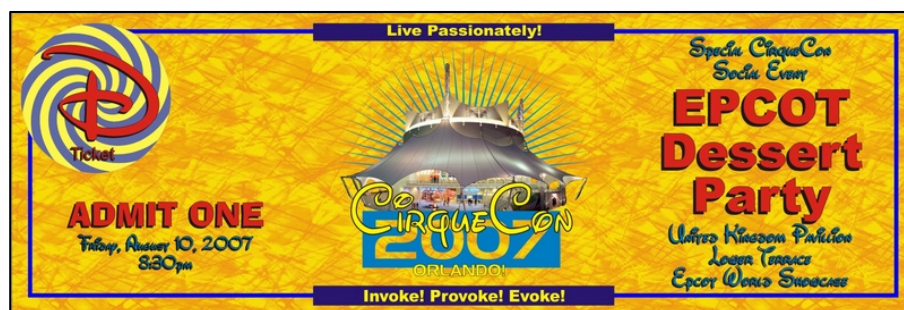
* * *

EPCOT Dessert Party -- On the evening of Friday, August 10th, we assembled on the banks of the World Showcase Lagoon for our first gathering of the weekend: a scrumptious Dessert Party at EPCOT, Walt Disney World's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. Prior to the event the CirqueCon membership was tantalized with the following possibility:

If you're a regular Disney Park visitor, you've seen privileged groups having special VIP parties behind closed doors with delicious looking foods to eat and impeccable service from Disney cast members catering to their every whim (that is, if you live at Disney like I do). Well, how would YOU like to be a Disney VIP for an evening too?

Doesn't having a "group only" area at Epcot just for us, desserts and drinks to sample as we mingle with our fellow Passionates in our very own exclusive spot for Illuminations: Reflections of Earth (Epcot's night-time fireworks extravaganza) sound like great fun?

Thirty-five (35) passionates thought so too and joined us for sweets and fireworks at the United Kingdom Pavilion's Lower Terrace, which not only gave us a wonderful area to get reacquainted with one another, but it also afforded us a fantastic view of the show.



"Good evening and welcome," the narrator begins as the World Showcase Lagoon becomes lit with flame (its 19-torches glow in the darkness). "We've gathered here tonight, around the fire, as people of all lands have gathered for thousands and thousands of years before us: to share the light and to share a story; an amazing story, as old as time itself but still being written. And though each of us have our own individual stories to tell a true adventure emerges when we bring them all together as one..."

Using the elements of fire, water and fireworks coupled with thrilling and inspiring orchestrations, a story of Earth from its earliest beginnings through the present day is told in four distinct acts:

- Act 1: Chaos - The explosive creation of the universe via the Big Bang is signified in volatile pyro and explosive fire culminating with the creation of our sun and its solar neighborhood.
- Act 2: Order - The Solar System cools and Earth begins to form, bringing order to chaos. Fires that raged for millennia have calmed and the Earth now floats amongst newly-born stars.
- Act 3: Celebration - Comets streak across the sky as the well of life springs eternal upon mother Earth. A celebration of cosmic life erupts in dance and song as the millennia pass by.
- Act 4: We Go On - Then, the Earth blossoms like a flower exposing a brilliant ball of fire, preparing us, the sojourners, for our next accomplishment: the next thousand years.

Thanks to our friends at Disney Events and our passionates that bought into this "D-Ticket" experience (that's "D" for Dessert!), waiting for us were a variety of miniature stemware glasses to include Classic Tiramisu, English Trifle, Fresh Fruit and Berries; Pastry Selections in Miniature to include: Fresh Fruit Tartlet, Vanilla Cream Filled Pastry Horns, Chocolate Éclairs, Chocolate and Pistachio Cannoli; and Beverages: Coffee, Decaffeinated Coffee, Hot Tea and Fruit Punch.

We chatted and ate as the spark of a thousand fireworks cast their brilliance over the waters of the World Showcase Lagoon, illuminating our planet's fantastic voyage for all who gathered for its earthly celebration.

The food was delicious, the tables set-up nicely, and the view... my god, who can watch Illuminations from the railing anymore!

It was fabulous!

La Nouba Theater Tour -- The following morning our fellowship gathered at the Cirque du Soleil Theater, Downtown Disney West Side, for a Question & Answer session with Richard Dennison (Theater Manager) and Robert Shuck (Production Manager). But before our festivities could begin inside the theater, Cirque opened the doors to its outside boutique a few minutes early... just for us to peruse! Imagine over fifty passionates storming through these castle gates with money in hand and a strong need to have as much Cirque stuff as one could possibly carry - I'm sure we frightened the cashiers at first, but, by the end of our time there they were just as excited and energized about us as we were. All told we spent a good amount a time milling about the store chatting it up, enjoying each other's company and getting ever keyed up about the things yet to come. And boy did our passionates spend a fortune!



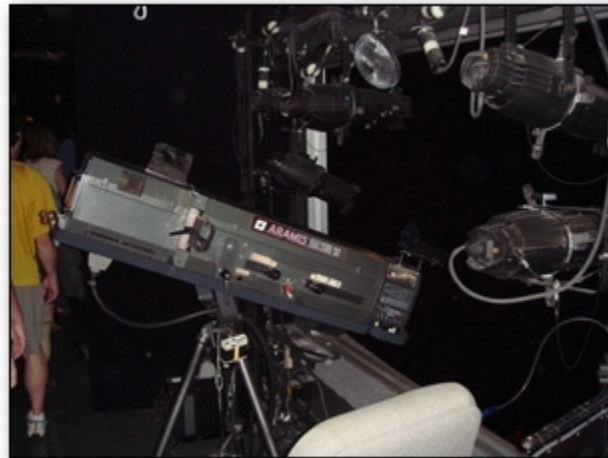


Once our wallets were lightened and our arms full of souvenirs, we filed into the La Nouba Theater and into seats in the 200 section, patiently waiting to speak with our hosts. Both Dennison and Shuck were very gracious to us, spending over three hours talking to us about the history of Cirque du Soleil, the positions they held in the company, walked us through what they did on a day-to-day basis, and enlightened us about how La Nouba operated from their logistical and operational perspective.

For example, did you know that Disney and Cirque joint-own the space? Cirque du Soleil retains creative ownership of the show, its equipment and operations, but Disney runs the ticket box office, contracts the cleaning services, performs the building maintenance (including all utilities) and even employs the ushers and snack-cart personnel. Mr. Dennison also told us that the La Nouba Theater and its setup is the blueprint for all future standard resident shows (i.e. a standard Cirque du Soleil production). This is why the showroom for Cirque du Soleil's upcoming production in Tokyo (tentatively called ZED) looks very similar to that of La Nouba's - only it's bigger!

After answering every one of our most pressing questions (we are quite an inquisitive bunch), our assembly split into two groups - one following Mr. Dennison and the other lead by Mr. Shuck - and visited virtually every nook and cranny of the theater and its space. I don't think there was an inch of the building spared by our excursion!

We squeezed into an over-sized elevator and ascended to the theater's 6th floor. When the doors parted, we found ourselves in what could easily be called the nerve-center of the show - **the Light Booth**. From this high-up location, the tech specialists have full view of the entire stage and control its movements on a bank of computer gear used both to monitor and manage the equipment around them. Here they direct not only the house lights, stage lights and track lighting used during the show, but also mix and balance the sound, call the queues, and run the stage automation (such as the lifts and automated set pieces). To help them orchestrate what must be a logistical nightmare, a video monitoring station is also nearby, which displays video feeds from 16 specifically placed cameras - such as



stage entrances and exists, above stage in the catwalks and below stage around the lifts. The technical crew is always in full communication with one another through an in-house wireless communications system. And because full concentration is required during the show (there are 300 automation queues and 1250 theatrical lighting instruments to control in La Nouba), the crew is separated from the live performance via a bank of smoked glass. But boy what a view they have!



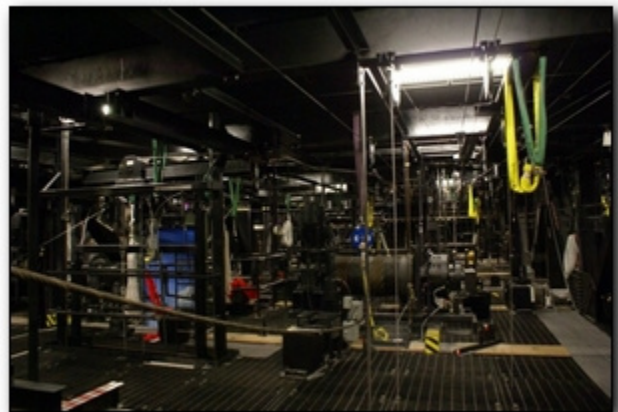
Next, our group descended down a rather non-descript but acoustically rich stairwell that some might have recognized as the stairwell that Isabeau Proulx-Lemire, La Nouba's male countertenor, used to warm up his voice prior to a performance, as shown on the behind-the-scenes elements from La Nouba's DVD. Unfortunately Isabeau (nor the current male singer) was waiting there to greet us but that connection, albeit brief and small, was nice.

The stairwell doors opened a moment later to admit us onto a curved hallway, **Behind the Trellis** - where we pretended to be the ones locked in the asylum, walking back and forth as they do during a live performance. From this side of the set, the PVC paneled halls appear no more decorated than your run-of-the-mill walkway, but from the audience's perspective, when properly lit, we would have been a cast of shadows pacing from

one cell to the other as if we too were sheltered within this strange cosmic refuge. One interesting fact about this area of the theater is the hallway here is a mandatory four-foot wide.

The **Band's Nest** - where La Nouba's talented musicians play night after night after night - was also nearby. While we didn't have the opportunity to step within the two 75 foot towers and peek out (for obvious reasons - who wouldn't be tempted to pick up an instrument and start playing!), taking a glance at where the band plays and the view they have of the stage and audience was quite a thrill.

Again, we squeezed ourselves into the elevator car and up we went to the highest level accessible within the theater, **the Grid** - where an amazing fusion of mechanical equipment and support systems reside. Here, on the 9th floor (approximately 74 feet from the base of the stage) is all the flying equipment, cable hoists, winch motors, aerial production sets, and their support gear are housed. Such as, the 25x60 foot trapeze net (which is fully automated by eight motors and two 40 horsepower net tensioning winches), the two trampolines used in the show's finale, the flying doors (of which there are 9), the petite fenêtre volante (or New York window / Aerial Cradle), two pedestal platforms and four trapeze grips. Also sharing this space is a metal workshop, a performer/crew rest spot and a few training mats.





The grid itself obtained its name due to the open grating that makes up its "floor". Through the 1x3-inch holes you can see right down onto the stage below! From this point in the theater space, we are even higher than the "Fabulous Figures" sculpture that dances upon the ceiling of the showroom. Take a look but don't loose it!

Back in the elevator for a trip down came next, to the **Basement** - where you'll find the housing for the lifts and other stage mechanics. La Nouba has five lifts in all, resting just below the stage surface. The ascent and descent of these lifts are controlled by numerous motors (45 in all!) that must be in complete working order for the lifts to even function (although they can crank them by hand, which has happened during a live performance). The five lifts themselves rise to a maximum height of 16-feet; the center stage lift is also capable of descending 16-feet below the stage for a 32-feet range of

motion! Down here you can see many of the safety interlockings and the motors used to raise and lower the lifts. It's a dirty, but fascinating part of the La Nouba Theater to be sure.

In the **Costume Department** - where all of the show's costumes are re-created, laundered and repaired - we were able to speak with the seamstresses, lightly touch the costumes and gently play with a few props here and there (nobody saw!), such as: the colorful gift boxes the clowns juggle during the pre-show animation, the cactus and palm trees prepared as set pieces, and the gear used to illustrate the miniature train's crossing of the stage. But guess what? It's not motorized! The model train is simply pulled along via string, coming to rest inside a long wooden box to protect it.



The **Makeup & Dressing Rooms** - where every costumed performer must dress and apply his or her character's unique makeup - was our last stop. You'd think this area would be a large, comfortable room but you'd be wrong to do so. La Nouba's dressing rooms are semi-cramped banks of mirrored cubicles with various wigs and applicator brushes on hand. Adorning the mirrors and walls at each station are guidelines for the performers to follow when applying their character's make up. Quite fascinating to see.



One of the things you quickly notice is the folks here are very cramped for space. Cost overruns during construction are to blame, resulting in the reduction of the overall circumference of the facility by about 25 feet. Since the show elements couldn't be slimmed down, cuts were obtained in two other categories: seating and storage. Seating capacity was reduced from 2102 to 1671 and all of the building's storage areas were

drastically reduced, and thus Cirque stores bulk wherever they can. This explains why small break rooms and training facilities can be found in unexpected areas, or that storage boxes and mechanical doodads are found in the oddest places. Even the elevator is affected - the door on the grid level only opens so far because there's a brace beam in front of it!

On the **Stage** is where you'll find even more interesting technological advancements. The retractable Power Track, which is built into the stage, is 60 feet in length and fully automated, which means computers in the Light Booth control the retraction of this enormously powerful trampoline (at 2-feet-per-second). But don't let that quick retraction fool you into thinking the floor is light; it's not, it weighs over 10,000 pounds! The two télépheriques (or tracks) installed along the back wall of the stage are 78-feet (24-meters) above the ground and are capable of moving props, scenery and acrobatic equipment during the show at 4-feet-per-second. These tracks provide an easy system for moving objects in and out of view of the spectators. You'll find various strange props, lights and chairs gliding by throughout the various acts including "The Grand Monument," a 40x30 foot structure of aluminum and painted scrim.



The two groups came together there on stage, where our tour of the facility ended.

It was excellent!

Some other pictures from our tour, include:



Group Meal -- For the sake of proximity to the Cirque du Soleil Theater, we chose the House of Blues for our gathering's Group Meal, where we met just a few short hours after the facility tour. The House of Blues completely outdid themselves by providing us not only our own dedicated section of the restaurant (where we could get as loud and psyched as we wanted), but also with a wonderful plated meal for thirty-three. No one left hungry - how could you with a three course meal?!

The First Course consisted of the House of Blues Salad, a traditional salad with Iceberg Lettuce, Red Cabbage, Red Onions, Diced Tomatoes, Croutons and Ranch Dressing. On the side we were given Rosemary Corn Muffins with Maple Butter.



We had three choices for our second course, the main entrée: Creole Jambalaya (with shrimp, chicken, Andouille sausage, Tasso ham and roasted green onions), Cajun Meatloaf (with wild mushroom gravy, mashed potatoes and sautéed vegetables), or Grilled Marinated Rosemary Chicken Breast (with a savory Andouille-corn bread pudding, Pinot Noir reduction and sautéed vegetables. And, of course, there was a vegetarian option if none of those suited your tastes.

The third and final course, desert of course, was a sinful triple layer chocolate cake layered with chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream.

It was yummy!

La Nouba Green Room Party -- Then it was off to La Nouba by 9:00pm, where, once upon a time a door opened and two worlds collided, where dreams clashed with reality and the mundane mixed with the marvelous. Our fellowship once again split up into two equal groups and took their respective seats in either section 103 (front and center) or section 204 (upper center) for the show. And it was one of the best showings of La Nouba ever! We were in a perfect position to generate some energy - occupying all of Row A and most of C in section 103, and the first three rows of section 204 - and boy did we! We blew the top off that bigtop and within 10 minutes the artists abandoned their normal run-of-the-mill routine and really juiced it up! It was spot on - no one missed their mark - including the trapeze artists, which generally have troubles connecting (not necessarily their fault). Oh, it was so exhilarating! Unfortunately while neither Rich, my girlfriend Nicole, nor I was picked for the Bike Jump routine, one of our fellow members was - Dan Taft - and it was his first time to La Nouba. What an introduction to the show, I say!





Mr. Dennison joined us down in section 103 at the end of the show, taking a seat on the front of the stage, chatting with us and saying how wonderful a show it was tonight. There he advised us all to stay in our seats as he had a few more surprises to hand out. Of course, one of his ushers had a surprise in store for him and tried to remove him instead! What a hoot! As soon as the usher saw his badge he backed off quickly and we all had a good laugh. Once the theater cleared out and the crew swept up the set, we all came together on stage for a group

photo with some of the cast and crew! Note the Four Les Cons, the German Wheel Duo (Bruce and Stacey Bilodeau), the Green Bird (Natasha Hallett), Le Titan (Krystian Sawicki), Red Acrobat and the Stroller (Carlos Márcio Moreira). Nicole and I took up a spot on one of the "mountains" (next to the Les Cons)

And if you hadn't quite had enough by that point, after the show we assembled out back in the La Nouba Green Room and patio for a little party with the cast and crew. Mr. Dennison and company arranged for us a "chips and drinks" style bash, serving soft drinks, beer, wine, chips, pretzels, and other munchies that was beyond our wildest dreams. Over the next hour or two, many of the show's cast and crew stopped by to mingle, chat, pose for pictures, get rambunctious and generally see what we were all about. It was perfect for us! And the more inebriated we all became, the wilder it got. Not only were we having programme books and other collectibles signed, it came to the point where certain body parts came under the black sharpie! (Clothing was optional). The party was so much fun, no one on either side wanted to leave!



It was perfect for us! And the more inebriated we all became, the wilder it got. Not only were we having programme books and other collectibles signed, it came to the point where certain body parts came under the black sharpie! (Clothing was optional). The party was so much fun, no one on either side wanted to leave!

Some of the cast and crew living it up with us were: Sisaundra Lewis-Reid (Singer), Michele Deschamps (Clown), Sandro Ojeda (Flying Trapeze), Miguel Vargas (Flying Trapeze), Stephane Bayol (Les Con), Antonieta Cuellar (Silks), Rob Dawson (Trapeze), Marcos De Jesus (Cycles), Rokardy (Chairs), Carlos Moreira (The Walker), Justin Osbourne (Les Con), Daniela Rabello (Silks), Karina Silva (Silks), Krissy Van Fleet (Power Track), Benoit Glazer (Conductor), Kristina Ivanova (Power Track), Sarah Touchette (Cleaning Lady), Krystian Sawicki (Le Titan), and Ana Cuellar (Silks) amongst others!

It was the best night ever!



During our conversations with some of the cast, we learned one amazing fact: our excitement was so high, our energy so powerful, and our applause so loud that many of them broke out in gooseflesh. They looked at each other and said "What the hell is going on..." as the cast waited to get on stage from below.

Now that's the power of passionate fans.

*Ladies and Gentlemen
Settled in Once Upon a Time
Is Where you'll find me
La Nouba*

The Fourth Gathering of CirqueCon took place in Orlando

The Fourth Unofficial Gathering of CirqueCon, our "Cirque du Soleil Passionates," took place in Orlando this past weekend. The group's last expedition was to Las Vegas in September 2006.

Forty-four members of CirqueCon gathered in Orlando and attended the 9:00 p.m. performance of *La Nouba* on Saturday, August 11. They enjoyed a question and answer session on Saturday afternoon, followed by a tour of the building. After seeing the show and enthusiastically cheering on the artists, they had a group photo taken on stage with about a dozen cast members still in make-up and costume. The visit ended with an informal beer, wine and finger food reception in the Green Room before we went home for the weekend. CirqueCon's members then spent a little more time enjoying Orlando and Disney before returning to their respective cities in Canada, Mexico and the U.S.



CirqueCon's next major trip to take in a Cirque show will be to Tokyo, likely in November 2008.

Richard Dennison
Director of Disney Project Development
Company Manager for *La Nouba*
Orlando



SEPTEMBER 2007

«East meets West, meets East»

ドラリオンの大阪
(Dralion in Osaka)



From the moment the rumor surfaced about a potential Japanese tour for Cirque du Soleil's Dralion in 2007, I waited with baited breath for the official announcements to be made. The reason for such a high level of anticipation on my part was simple: since I would be returning to Japan on a 14-day excursion that September, I stood a good chance of being onshore for some part of Dralion's tour - if the fates aligned properly, that is. Given that I had not yet experienced Cirque du Soleil in Asia - with the super new big tops, the interesting and new souvenirs, and famously demure audiences - having opportunity to do so was quite exciting, even if it was just a possibility. When the itineraries were finally published I had my answer: Dralion would be in Osaka from July 25th through October 14th - exactly in the middle of my trip and right about the time I would be in that region of Kansai. After perusing the show schedule in Osaka, I was able to settle on a date and time: Saturday at 4:00pm!

By the time Saturday, September 15, 2007 came round I had already spent seven days exploring the Japanese countryside. The first four were spent in the Kanto region - walking around Tokyo, Tokyo Disneyland, Tokyo DisneySEA, and the magnificent cities of Nikko and Kamakura. I was now spending my remaining days in Kansai, discovering (or rediscovering as it were) the cities of Kyoto, Osaka, Miyajima, and Hiroshima, with all their historical richness. In fact, before immersing myself in Cirque du Soleil and exploring the wonderful castle (read: Grand Chapiteau) that was built for it, I spent the day exploring another magnificent castle: Himeji-jo.

* * *

To understand Japan you must first understand its vast history, its culture and its people. Since one could speak volumes about Japan for over a hundred years and still not cover all the many facets of Nippon, I will say for the sake of brevity that the Japanese are a very orderly and reserved people. Be that as it may, the pop-culture there is on a

much higher and stranger plane than ours, and travels faster than the speed of light at all times. Technology is very much a part of everyday life to the point where it almost crosses over into the fanciful. The Shinkansen, the fastest of trains in all of Japan for example, will take you from one end of the country to the other - from Hachinohe in the north to Hakata in the south - in as little as 8.5 hours (with just one stop!). The trip from the "Eastern Capital" to the "Western Capital" - Tokyo to Kyoto - takes just under 2.5 hours. From Kyoto to Osaka - less than 20 minutes. Out to Himeji, the wonderful place to learn a little about Japan's vast history that I mentioned, takes a little over an hour from Kyoto. That's fast!

Thoughts about the ticket issue crossed my mind as I embarked for Himeji to explore its famous castle and possibly traverse the mountainside of Mount Shosha to Engyo-ji, a famous temple complex, that particular morning. It crossed my mind because purchasing a ticket to Dralion in Osaka was precarious at best; it couldn't be done through regular channels online and by phone would prove to be nothing more than an exercise being lost in translation. The only avenue offered to those in the English-speaking world (or for anyone outside of Japan for that matter) was purchase-by-email directly with Cirque du Soleil.



But it too proved to be questionable: a ticket, while reserved in your name, was not actually paid for - it was on hold. You could not ask for a specific seat, although a certain section might be guaranteed. And the ticket could not be paid for via credit card; it must be purchased directly in cash 1 hour (no later) from the start of the show directly from the box office. With all that uncertainty, one has to wonder: what would happen if they lost your reservation, or if you arrived a few minute late? Your seat was not guaranteed, was the answer, and it would most likely be sold to those waiting in reserve.



So, I had to make sure I didn't spend too much time out at Himeji or I would miss my window of opportunity, and then where would I be?

Daybreak came at 6:30am granting just enough time to make a cash withdrawal at the Kyoto post office (for the ticket), grab a quick breakfast at the nearby Lawson (a convenience store), and rush to Hikari #391 bound for Himeji, a city about 45-minutes away on one of Japan's high-speed bullet trains, the Shinkansen. With the day's itinerary in hand, I stepped from the bowls of the beast Hikari and onto the streets of Himeji - I already could see the castle in the distance. A short walk up the main street and I was on its doorstep, and what a magnificent castle it was!



Himeji-jo, or Himeji Castle, has escaped the ravages of war, earthquakes and fire-bombings to become the finest surviving example of early 17th century Japanese castle architecture, and as such is one of only four castles given the distinction of being a national treasure of Japan. While its origin is far earlier, the current compound dates to 1609 and comprises 83 interlocking buildings, with highly developed systems of offense and ingenious protection devices from the beginning of the Shogun period, but still remains

quite stately to ensure a sense of opulence for its day.

Its confusing maze of paths that lead up to the main keep are one of Himeji's most famous defensive elements, and one I find most interesting. The 20 gates, 3 baileys (called maru) and outer walls (some reaching 1000 meters long!) are organized such to force an approaching opponent's army into a spiral pattern around the castle's keep, with many dead ends along the way for them to frustrate into. In conjunction with other defensive systems (like the ishi-otoshi, or rock chutes), this kept all intruders within visual range at all times and allowed a barrage of fire to rain upon them for the entire approach. Since the castle was never attacked in this way, the system has never been tested, but that does not take away any element of amazement from this preparation.

A masterpiece of construction, Himeji-jo combines function with aesthetic appeal, both in its elegant appearance unified by its white plastered earthen walls, its curved stone castle walls, and in the subtlety of the relationships between the building masses. Because of its striking white edifice, the castle is also fondly referred to as the "White Egret Castle", and is generally considered to be the most beautiful castle in the entire country. I tend to agree.



There is much history here; so much so that I lost myself in the relic. This is what being in Japan for me is all about - exploring that rich and full history the Japanese have. It's also probably one of the best examples of family crest history at one single location. You'll find the Cross of Ykuroda oshitaka, the Five-Three Paulownia leaf of Hashiba Hideyoshi, the Butterfly with Raised Wings of Ikeda Terumasa, the Standing Hollyhock Trefoil of Honda Tadamasa, the Water Plantain of

Matsudaira Tadaaki, the Three Tomoe Whorls of Matsudaira Naomoto, The Gengi Wheel of Sakakibara Tadatsugu and the Spear points around Wood Sorrel of Sakai Tadazumi in the eaves of the elegantly sloping roofs. But this is an entire subject all to its own and if you're interested, I invite you to research more on the subject, it really is fascinating!



By the time I walked away from Himeji-jo there was little time left to safely scale the side of Mount Shosha and see Engyo-ji, so I hopped the 1:02pm Hikari train into Osaka and begun my exploration of another of Japan's interesting castles: the new Fuji Big top.

ドラリオン

< <http://www.dralion.jp/> >



The above link takes you to the official Dralion in Japan website, unfortunately though it's mostly in Japanese so surfing its pages for information pertaining to the tour will be tenuous at best. For those lost in translation, Dralion is the fusion of ancient Chinese circus tradition with the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil. Its creativity draws on the culture of two worlds, personifying their civilizations with two icons - a Dragon, representing the east; and a Lion, representing the west. The combination of

these separate philosophies - Dralion - is thrust into a plane of existence that is neither past nor future.

This realm is maintained by the four natural elements: 空 air (Azala), 水 water (Oceane), 土 earth (Gaya) and 火 fire (Yao). Together they weave a haunting tale on this ethereal plane, a celebration of life, where the seeds of creation are sewn and our imaginations born. By paying homage to the elements, Dralion derives much of its inspiration from Eastern philosophy, with its perpetual quest for harmony between man and nature. We are all invited to embark upon a fabulous journey through an extraordinary universe a timeless and allegorical place, ruled by magical laws.



And in Japan, it dances on a magical stage - within the Fuji Dome big top. I found the Fuji Dome perched near the Cosmosquare complex, in the heart of Nanko town, the port section of Osaka City.

A number of questions come to mind when you think about a Cirque du Soleil tour in another country - from language and cultural differences to site set up and execution. Largely, however, Cirque du Soleil tours are virtually the same whether they take place in Canada, the United States, throughout Europe, Mexico, Australia and South America. But there is one place where a Cirque du Soleil tour is different on all levels: Japan.

Cirque du Soleil's tours in Japan have always been somewhat different than those presented elsewhere in the world; they are rather more technically minded. Besides the obvious language and cultural barriers, one of the greatest examples of this ingenuity is the concept of the "New Big Top" venue. It is one of the first things that will strike you oddly immediately upon arrival to the site and it is most unlike anything you have seen used at a Cirque du Soleil performance before. No longer is Cirque du Soleil featured in their signature blue-and-yellow striped canvas, the contents of the big top are set under a specially designed structure by sponsors Fuji Telecasting and Nissan/Daihatsu.



What makes this venue so special?



Besides comfortably sitting approximately 2700 patrons, the structure is completely mastless; therefore, every paying patron is afforded a comprehensive unobstructed view of the show with a complete 270-degree view in the round. With a height of 28 meters (96 feet) and a diameter of 57 meters (187 feet), this is one impressive beast. I say impressive becomes there's nothing supporting the center of this enormous big top except its steel frame! And to support that, the big top actually sits on a concrete base (making it a semi-permanent structure).

As such it takes approximately twice as long to set up than normal Cirque du Soleil big tops - it's so complex it requires the assistance of a crane or two.

In fact, the "New Big Top" concept has been evolving over time.

For example, for Cirque du Soleil's original tour of Japan ("Fascination"), Japanese spectators did not sit in the normal 270-degree semi-circle; instead, audiences sat in seats arranged in a square-like pattern in front of and on either side of the circular stage. While this might seem wasteful, the presentation was completely unobstructed and presented all around the circular stage. This pattern was also used for Saltimbanco's 1994 Japanese tour inside the "Blue Special Tent". And it was to the "White Theater" that Alegria came to when it toured Japan in 1996. White Theater and the theater used for Saltimbanco in 1994 were very similar in design and function; it wasn't until the next tour came round that the real innovation occurred. For Quidam's tour in 2003, Fuji expanded upon the concept and created an all white dome, which was used for both Quidam's 2003 and Alegria's 2004/2005 tours of Japan. For Dralion, the tour shrugged off the Cirque's trademark blue-and-yellow colors for a dark blue-and-white motif.



It's very, very impressive.

For the most part the Fuji Big Top is constructed to look very much like the Funambule white tent that originally toured with Saltimbanco and Alegria outside of North America - with doors 1 and 2 accessible under a connected merchandise tent. I definitely couldn't wait to get inside. At first glance, concessions for Japanese audiences are similar to that anywhere else in the world - there is food and drink to taste and a multitude of souvenirs for purchase. But if you take a closer look you'll find the items available are tailored to the spectator at hand much more so than they are elsewhere on tour (beyond the traditional CD/DVD items).



One of the most interesting items on the Japanese tour is its programme Book. While all other tours must be content with the same shape, style and photos of the current style of book (perhaps with some language updates depending on region), Japanese audiences are treated to a completely new type of book. Not only is the book spine flipped for traditional right to left reading, it's oversized and comes chock full of updated character and act pictures, information pertaining to the tour, behind the scenes elements (in Japan and wherever else the show was last), and, probably the most exciting

aspect of all, an updated listing of the cast complete with in-make up and out-of-makeup head shots! Truly a wonderful collector's item.

Another interesting item is 手ぬぐい, or Tengui.



If you ever journey to Japan during the warm summer months one of the things you might quickly notice is that you are the only one sweating - the Japanese never seem to. Truth be told, they are sweating just as much as you are; it's just that they have Tengui to inconspicuously wipe the moisture away! As traditional cotton head cloths, Tengui come in all shapes, sizes and colors. Those for everyday use are not nearly as heavily ornamented or pigmented, and actually are more rag like than artful. You'll see many Japanese with Tengui in hand, or at least, not far from sight. So, for Dralion, Cirque du Soleil presented a small contingent of Tengui designs in two styles: three of which were non-descript (meaning other than the Cirque du Soleil tag there was nothing in the design to suggest Cirque) design available in red, green and yellow, and a fourth that was all blue with the Cirque du Soleil sun logo stitched in gold. For just ¥650 one of these could have been yours - I couldn't help but pick up the sun logo one for myself. *wipe-wipe*

And, naturally, there were accessories for cell phones, candies and chocolates to buy as gifts (the Japanese are very much into gift giving) and other such knick-knacks.

And what about the performance?

The performance itself was quite solid, one of the best I'd seen of Dralion in quite some time. I had great seats (equivalent to last row in section 103, far left seat) and I must say that any pre-conceptions I ever had about Japanese audiences was blown out of the water. I've been told that they're more reserved than American/European audiences and that they hardly ever express themselves. Well... not this crowd. Not in Osaka they don't! Now to be fair the audience did not whoop and holler like they do in the USA, but they were very expressive of their gratitude during the show and its acts. They applauded at all the appropriate times and gasped, ooohed, aahhed, and were very much into the show like any other audience. The biggest differences? It seems the Japanese like to rhythmically clap and there is no standing ovation after the finale. Other than that, Japanese audiences have the same energy as any other audience, it's just a little more reserved.

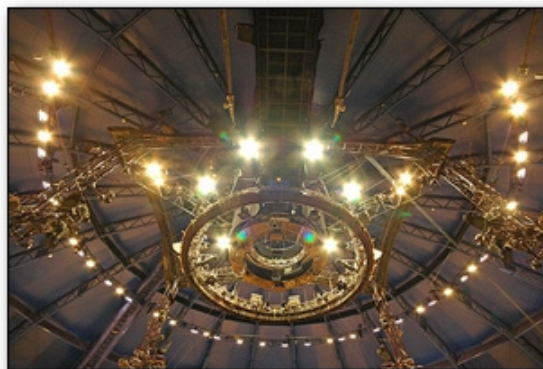


The music on the other hand was vastly different than what you hear on the CD or DVD. Where the Eastern influences prevailed in earlier sets, in Japan these have been remixed with rock or techno-like beats. I'm not quite sure if it's just for Japan or if that's how Dralion's live music has evolved over the years (the last time I saw Dralion performed live was in Seattle, August 2002). In some cases I enjoyed what I

heard but in others I did not. Some of the songs were barely recognizable! But at least the acts as presented were spot on: Hand balancing (シングル・ハンドバランシング; a slight and fragile young girl balances herself on a cane, constantly changing positions), Bamboo Poles (バンブー・ポールズ; six men maneuver 15.75-foot long poles demonstrating their keen sense of precision and synchronization), Juggling (ジャグリング; an amazingly choreographed fast-paced juggling act - seven balls at one time - with hints of modern dance), Trampoline (トランポリン), Double Trapeze (ダブル・トラピス; an acrobatic trapeze performed by two couples)...

Ballet on Lights

(バレエ・オン・ライト; a unique dance presented for the first time in the world. Seven young woman perform a ballet on light bulbs using specially designed shoes), Dralions (ドラリオン; a dynamic and energetic tumbling sequence using wooden balls that artists roll under their feet), Spirits (a haunting synchronized ballet of four using wires), Foot Juggling (フォト・ジャグリング; a young girl balances and twists



Chinese umbrellas on the soles of her feet), Hoop Diving (フープ・ダイビング; a tribal flavored production whereby ten male artists dive and throw themselves through wooden hoops), and Skipping Rope (スキッピング・ロープ; an undulating rope skipping to the beat of a tribal drum where artists perform flips, make pyramids and a three-person high column, all the while jumping).

While most of the numbers presented in Dralion have changed very little since their original staging, let me just say that the Trampoline number is fabulous. Integrated into the show in mid 2005, the Trampoline really kicks up the first half of Dralion, more so than the act it replaced: Teeterboard (which, some may remember, was ridiculed because of its overuse of safety wires).

The acrobats here use the futuristic backdrop as both a diving board and landing pad for the twists, flips and tricks they perform by jumping on the trampolines below them. Think of the performance as a cross between Fast Track, as presented in Alegría, and "the Wall" in La Nouba - a high energy, crowd pleasing piece that while not the best trampoline act in Cirque du Soleil (in my opinion), it certainly is fun to watch.



Oh, and though we all (meaning we Cirque fans) have cursed the use of guide wires in the show, I must say having them on Duo Trapeze is a must. Tonight one of the girls missed her catcher and she went flying. The wire caught her, of course, but I could just imagine what would have happened if she didn't have it! Although on the flipside, having those wires on the Ballet on Lights number is quite annoying. And let's not start on the clowns. They're just as lifeless as before although the crowd seemed to like them well enough. Oh, and the Japanese audience plant really got them. Good stuff.

Not long after the show ended I made my way back to Shin-Osaka station to catch the next Hikari or Kodama train back into Kyoto. Before I left, though, I learned a couple of interesting facts about Osaka:

- Osaka is the second smallest prefecture in all of Japan (Kagawa prefecture is currently the smallest by area).
- The population in Osaka is roughly 7% of the entire country, or approximately 8.8 million people.
- Population wise, Osaka is the third most populous prefecture after Tokyo and Kanagawa.
- Osaka City itself, the capital of the prefecture, is the second largest metropolitan area behind the special twenty-three wards area of Tokyo and third-largest by population, with an estimate of 2.7 million people inhabiting the city.
- A unique record that the city holds is the largest difference between daytime and nighttime population: there's a 141% difference between the two, making Osaka the largest commuter capital in all of Japan - even larger than Tokyo.

* * *

Cirque du Soleil too observed a milestone while in Osaka. On October 2, 2007, Dralion celebrated its 3000th performance. (I'm just sorry I couldn't be there!) Wow!

Until next time.

Ja ne!



DECEMBER 2007

« Celebri: A Coming Together »

Part 1: NYC & SFO



You may have heard about it in passing but just what is a *Celebri*?

From the Italian, *Celebri!* is a coming together of friends to *celebrate* Cirque du Soleil in various geographical settings. By supporting a small reunion multiple times a year, *Celebri!* desires to ensnare the jubilant, ecstatic, and euphoric feelings that well up inside each avid Cirque du Soleil fan, and nurture that festivity into a joyous and wonderful occasion with friends and fellow fans alike.

Each event is different, complete with its own soul and tale to tell. Experience with us now the tales of the first two *Celebri* outings in New York City, New York (NYC) and San Francisco, California (SFO)...

* * *

Celebri! NYC: "Au Nouveau Yorque " ///

WHERE: New York City, New York (USA)

WHAT: Cirque du Soleil's Wintuk & More!

WHEN: Nov.09.2007 - Nov.12.2007

Celebri's genesis found its ignitive spark a few short weeks prior to its inaugural run in another Cirque-oriented gathering that both Rich and I are part of (and coordinated): *CirqueCon 2007: Orlando!*



CirqueCon, as you may or may not know, is an assembly of "Cirque Passionates" that found its light on Saturday, May 22, 2004 when 30-plus fans of Cirque du Soleil, from across North and Central America, descended upon the city of Vancouver to celebrate the return of *Quidam*, which had just delighted audiences in Japan for more than a year. The meeting was so successful that *CirqueCon* continued and visited Montreal in 2005, Las Vegas for 2006, Orlando in 2007 and Tokyo for 2008.

It was during *CirqueCon 2007: Orlando* that whispers of getting together again soon in a smaller, more intimate fashion began to find its voice. And thus Celebri was born. We chose New York City for its food, for its sights, for its people and most importantly, for Wintuk - Cirque du Soleil's newest resident production (at the time). It was perfect.

So, on November 8, 2007, we descended upon the Big Apple and what an amazing time it was! Rich, Nicole (my girlfriend) and I boarded the 7-train at Lowry/41st-Street from Long Island City the following morning and made our way into Manhattan to begin a day of discovery and exploration.



Our day started down at the Circle Line docks for a little journey to the Statue of Liberty. If there's one thing you have to see when visiting the Big Apple, it is lady Liberty. Many know that the Statue of Liberty was a gift to the United States by France in 1886 to commemorate the centennial of the United States' Declaration of Independence from Great Britain and the friendship our two nations established during the American Revolution. She stands triumphantly out there in New York Harbor, lighting the way to the land of prosperity, and if you miss the opportunity to see her (whether in good weather or bad), you'll be really disappointed. So, even though the weather was not the greatest (it wasn't too cold and windy like last time I visited the island - man, I nearly froze my lips off! - but it wasn't clear blue skies and sunny

either), I just had to take Rich and Nicole over. And with monument passes in hand, we even got an inside peek! It is unfortunate though that you can no longer make the trek to the observation gallery at the crown.

After Ms. Liberty, it was no holds bars for the rest of Manhattan.

Continuing our adventure northward, we made a stop in the financial district - There's Wall Street itself, which is both a street and a neighborhood, that's the home to America's financial industry. You'll find the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), the NASDAQ index, American Stock Exchange (AMEX), the Mercantile Exchange (MEX) and The Board of Trade for New York all within the area. Of course the most famous (or infamous) is the New York Stock Exchange building at the corner of Wall and Broad streets and the Federal Hall. Historians may know that it was on this very spot that George Washington, our first President, was inaugurated and just a few months later, where the Bill of Rights was passed. Even Wall Street's name can be traced back to the original New Amsterdam settlement where the road served as its boundary and then later as the location of an actual fortified wall!

Fans of Disney/Touchstone's "National Treasure" film starring Nicholas Cage may recognize the phrase "Heere at the Wall" and follow the clues to Trinity Church, which sits on the corner of Broadway and Wall Street. Like much of New York City, the church is steeped in rich history. It is a full service Episcopalian parish that began services on site in 1698; however, the church you see today is not the original - it's actually the second reconstruction! The first burned down in the Great New York City Fire of 1776 and the second was demolished after the structure buckled under heavy snowfall in 1839. Today's church was built in 1846 and has stood since (believe it or not, at one time this was the highest building in New York City!). If you stick around long enough you may even hear its bells chime. There are 23 of them in its tower, each weighing 2700 pounds. And, no, there's not a secret passage to huge underground chambers containing large amounts of treasure... not that I can say, really.

Part of the Financial District legacy is, of course, Ground Zero - the site of the World Trade Center tower remains. It's a story that virtually everyone knows so there's no sense in re-iterating it again; however, suffice it to say, it's always a solemn reminder of that ghastly day and seeing it was important.

After a brief walk-by of the famous Brooklyn Bridge, we descended beneath the city to traverse the subway lines through to Rockefeller Center. It's a massive complex of buildings located in Midtown Manhattan between 48th and 51st streets, and between 5th and 7th avenues. Founded in 1939 by John D. Rockefeller Jr., it is here you'll find the home of NBC with many of its famous studios right on site. Atop this building is an observation deck (open to the public) called "Top of the Rock", which offers commanding views of Midtown, Downtown and Central Park. Radio City Music Hall (home of the Rockettes) is nearby as is Carnegie Hall, the city's prestigious concert venue. Although exciting in their own right, these pale in comparison to the main attraction at Rockefeller Center during the holidays - the Christmas tree and ice skating rink.



Here at 42nd Street and Park Avenue is the reverent and ever popular Grand Central Station, or should I be exactly correct and say Grand Central Terminal. One of the more recognizable landmarks in this vast City, Grand Central Terminal is a wonder of size (it occupies an area of 48 acres!). It is the largest train station in the world by platform count (you'll find 44 platforms beneath the bustling streets consisting of 67 tracks), and has about 103 inhabiting businesses (the oldest of which is Oyster Bar, which opened there in 1913. Grand Central is a busy thoroughfare throughout the day, but if you're ever through, take a moment to stop in. The ceiling offers a breathtaking view of the universe via Skyscape (as painted in 1912 by French artist Paul César Helleu), and the four-faced clock - each of the faces is made of Opal! Step outside and look over the façade facing 42nd Street and you'll find the world's largest example of Tiffany stained glass.

And, like the Statue of Liberty, no trip to New York City is complete until you've stepped foot in Time's Square amongst the flashing lights, busy streets and humanity that is The Big Apple. It's one of the most recognizable landmarks in the entire city and truly doesn't need an introduction. As you can see, by the end of the afternoon I had Rich and Nicole dizzy from all the sights and subway rides.



We calmed things down later on in the evening when we and the rest of the Celebri group all assembled at the corner of 6th Avenue and 36th Street for a wonderful meal at Keen's Steakhouse, a chophouse as famous for its muttons as it is for its collection of clay smoking pipes on display in every nook and cranny of its ceiling. Keen's turned out to be a fantastic, classy establishment that teetered just on the edge of eclectic (just the way we like it!). And while

they might be famous for their muttonchops, it was the Prime Filet Mignon that had my mouth watering. MmmmmMmm!

Then we hit Wintuk at Madison Square Garden - our reason for coming to New York City in the first place. WINTUK is an enchanting winter tale about a boy and his quest for snow and adventure. The boy lives in a city where the arrival of winter has brought long shadows and intense cold - but no snow! He interacts with a cast of high energy urban street characters; but when the snow does not arrive, he embarks on a quest with three companions - a female shaman who's lost in the city, a shy man destined to discover his courage and the shadow of a young girl - to find the snow and bring it back to where it belongs. The adventurer's journey to an imaginary Arctic - a world without sunlight - where they encounter the rich culture of the People of the North and extraordinary giant characters made of snow and ice. The entire spectacle plays out in the 4500-seat WaMu Theater at Madison Square Garden, a unique show space for a Cirque du Soleil show if I do say so myself. The 20-foot ceiling above the 100-foot wide stage is certainly a limiting factor; how can Cirque perform its world-class aerial acts without much aerial space? The results, though, are interesting: the layout evokes a "Wide-Screen" like presentation you'd find in movie theaters across the land. Cirque in CinemaScope?





Through the eleven (11) numbers presented in two acts, we sat astounded (or confused, you pick). The show begins with a Charivari (Skateboarders and inline skaters take to Wintuk's alley and its ramp by storm, tearing up and down the stage performing technical twists, acrobatic turns and spins; while others jump rope and lampposts dance), Slack Wire (an acrobat performs a series of striking movies on what appears to be a clothesline), Juggling (a high-speed juggling act helped out by the show's dog puppets), Rola Bola (a balancing act using props from city life, such as boards, pipes, cones and construction horses), Rag Doll (a wonderful talent in flexibility staged as a life-size rag doll under siege by a thief and business person), Inner Tubes (the People of the North make their entrance, bouncing up and down on regular floating-type tubes), Cyr

Wheel (a metal hoop of about 6 feet in diameter whirls about the stage), Hoops (Elena Lev as the High Priestess performs her amazing manipulation act with multiple metallic hoops), Swiss Balls (a comedic performance on exercise equipment), Aerial Straps (an acrobatic ballet full of grace and elegance that symbolizes rebirth, the coming dawn, and the Sun's victory over the Shadows), and Russian Bars (the show's closing act, presented somewhat differently - rather than jumping straight into the air, several jumps are executed horizontally, having the performers land on their stomachs or hands rather than their feet). Two and a half hours later, Wintuk came to a snow-filled close and many of us (including myself) wasn't sure what to make of it all. Singing lampposts? Side-ways aerial acts?



By then it was late in the evening, but who said we had to call it a night? New York is the city that never sleeps, right? So we hit Times Square for an after-show dessert and coffee party, discussing the ins and outs of the show!



Even though the stagehands union strike put the kybosh on our plans to see Disney's "The Lion King" on Broadway, Cirque du Soleil's Wintuk still tickled our hearts. Everyone seemed to have a grand time at Keen's steakhouse (and we must all thank the Metzger's for picking up the tab for us), at Wintuk and at Junior's afterwards for cheesecake (yum, yum, yum!). I would also like to extend my personal thanks to Heather and Jim for their kindness in inviting us out to dinner Sunday night and for taking the time out of their personal lives to be our nighttime tour guides (driving us from Uptown to Downtown and from the Bronx to Queens). It was great fun!

Celebri! SFO: "Koozå Palooza" ///

WHERE: *San Francisco, California (USA)*

WHAT: *Cirque du Soleil's Koozå & More!*

WHEN: *Nov.30.2007 - Dec.02.2007*

"Turn here!"

"Where?"

"Right here!!"



It's been a right, full day here in the "City by the Bay", and it seems sad that it must come to an end so soon. Less than 20 days after holding our first event in New York City, Rich and I touched down on the west coast of the United States for "Koozå Palooza", the moniker given to our gathering of friends in San Francisco for Cirque du Soleil's newest touring production, Koozå. While it's mostly been just the two of us, our friends Rafael & Angelica Serrano (and kids) from Tijuana, Mexico came out to join us for dinner. And we've had a blast since!



Of course, we've had our trials too.

Touring the city with a flummoxed GPS system tends to do that. And Rich is not too fond of my quick navigational changes, as the above conversation snippet attests to. But beyond that we've really had a great time here in San Fran - touring the sights, enjoying each other's company, having good times with friends and taking in Cirque du Soleil. That's what Celebri is all about!

Of course, Cirque du Soleil isn't the only draw here - there are at least three things you must do when you come to San Francisco: 1) Drive across the Golden Gate Bridge, 2) Take a ride on a Cable Car and 3) Visit Fisherman's Wharf on the Embarcadero. And we did all three.

The Golden Gate Bridge is a monumental testament of know-how and ingenuity that has become the quintessential symbol of the city itself since it was completed in 1937. Naturally a traveler such as me would want to gaze upon its deep orange hues and marvel at the sheer beauty of its construction - as close up as possible. On my last visit to San Francisco (which happened to be my first), I came no closer to the famed bridge than the waterfront near Fisherman's Wharf - there just wasn't enough time! - So this time I wanted to be sure I got a close up look. And took Rich on a ride in the hills! Psst, here's a little secret: while getting a glimpse of the bridge from its designated viewing platform on the San Francisco side provides great views of the bridge, drive over to Marin County side and take trip into the Marin Headlands. This region is part of the Golden Gate National Recreational Area and while you may find the roads small and winding, the vistas commanded here are so spectacular, I am at a loss for words.

Another secret: drive up there at night!





The Cable Cars too offer a unique treat for visitors and it's probably my most favorite feature of San Francisco. There's just something about hanging out the side of the car as it speeds down Hyde Street, air rushing past your ears, with Alcatraz looming off in the distance, that's thrilling beyond words. Ding! Ding! Did you know there are three lines in operation today? The Powell-Hyde line, the Powell-Mason line and the California

Street line are the only ones left in public use. The most ridden, and perhaps the most famous of these lines, is the Powell-Hyde line, which runs from Powell/Market Street down to the waterfront near the San Francisco Maritime Museum. Here tourists (like us) can take this line through the heart of downtown to such sights as Lombard Street (the crookedest street in the world), Ghirardelli's (world-famous Chocolatier), Hard Rock Café (which is a favorite of Rich's) and Fisherman's Wharf.

Fisherman's Wharf is probably the quintessential tourist destination in San Francisco because anything you want can be found there: from seafood to sea-salts and everything else in between. Especially on Pier 39, where you can shop for puppets, sea salt soaps, Babushka dolls from Russia, socks, herbs, crystal, taffy and fudge. I highly recommend the fudge at Chocolate Heaven; it's to die for. And the little chocolate cable cars are cute too! Oh, and don't mind the seals -- they like it there (even if the establishment's owners don't!)



We caught up with the Serrano's here at the Wharf, sat down and had dinner at Hard Rock Café before heading off to Koozå. It was the first time we had met the shy Serrano children, but it was warming to see Rafael and Angelica again. They're such classy people and good friends. Sharing a meal with them is like being with family. You just can't go wrong with that!

Before long it was time to enter the Grand Chapiteau for Koozâ. Koozâ, whose name is inspired by the Sanskrit word "koza," meaning "box," "chest" or "treasure," tells the story of a melancholy loner (The Innocent) in search of his place in the world taken on a journey through strength, fragility, laughter, turmoil and harmony. "Koozâ is also about human connection and the world of duality, good and bad," says the show's writer and director David Shiner.



"The tone is fun and funny, light and open. The show doesn't take itself too seriously, but it's very much about ideas, too. As it evolves we are exploring concepts such as fear, identity, recognition and power."

Consequently, it was our third time catching the show since its inception; Rich and I had traveled to Montréal the previous April to see the show take its first tentative steps. While in this French enclave of Canada, we had a few crapes, met a couple friends, and even chatted with the director of the show: David Shiner (we even gave him one of Rich's signature buttons, which Mr. Shiner proudly wore!) While we'd likely not see anyone special at the show or have interactions of any kind with the cast and crew, we had a great time never-the-less and answered some of our most pressing questions about the show in the process -- would it be as fun a few months later?

The answer? An overwhelming yes!

To Be Continued...



APRIL 2008

«Bienvenidos a Mexico»

Quidam in Monterrey



From the very first moment I stepped off the small jetliner and felt the warmth of the afternoon sun wash across my face I sensed I was in a strange, new land.

The place I left was cold, dark and still tucked in for the night. The sun here was full and bright - sharing its radiant energy with us unabated by cloud or storm, and at the same time becoming playful with a zephyr, teasing it to tottle about in excited rushes, bringing balance to the day's warm brilliance.

And on those breezes a tantalizing hint of spice.

Ahhhhhhhhhh.

In all my voyages since I'd been bitten by the travel bug in 2002, though I've visited north many times, I had yet to trek south of the border to Mexico, where I find myself now for the very first time.

And why am I here?

For Cirque du Soleil of course! I'm here to see Quidam, one of Cirque du Soleil's signature shows with one of Mexico's most fervent fans of the troupe: Rodolfo Elizondo!

My exhilarating adventure began the moment I met Rodolfo and left General Mariano Escobedo International Airport (MTY) making our way into the zona centro of Monterrey, 30 minutes away. It was a whirl-wind weekend that I shall not soon forget.

/// THE CITY OF MOUNTAINS

Monterrey (pronounced with a heavy 'rrrrr') is a very modern Mexico City situated in the northeastern state of Nuevo León, approximately 150 miles south of the United States border. This state capital boasts a populace that ranks it third behind the Greater Mexico City and Greater Guadalajara metropolises and is home to many businesses, industries, universities and families. But for only three short weeks, Monterrey would also be home to Quidam.



Rodolfo and I scrambled into his Toyota SUV and made haste to the center of Monterrey where the blue-and-yellow striped big-top awaited us. While we had a number of hours yet to go before our performance began, neither of us could wait to steal a look at the Grand Chapiteau standing triumphantly in Parque Fundidora. And as soon as we rounded the corner of this millworks-turned-greenspace, I spotted it. "There it is! There it is!" I said, mimicking a short clip from Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (Trekkies will no doubt recognize a similar line spoken by Khan as he tracks the Enterprise down in the Mutara Nebula.)



After spying the Grand Chapiteau and its immediate surroundings from the car, we grabbed lunch at one of Rodolfo's favorite eating establishments at the Galerías Valle Oriente. It was a buffet of wonderful Mexican cuisine: beans and rice, chicken with a chocolate sauce (chicken mole), grilled beef, salads, fruits and chips! After lunch Rodolfo took me on a whirl-wind tour of his hometown, which not only thoroughly encompassed the brightest spots of Monterrey but also a journey that I found culturally fascinating.

Our first stop was the Mirador del Obispado (Bishop's Lookout), which is located atop Cerro del Obispado, the hill of the same name. Rising about 775 meters above sea level, this viewpoint is adorned with a fabulous circular esplanade with a humongous flag and pole at its center. Besides a fantastic panoramic view of the surrounding city - you can easily spot all of downtown Monterrey and its sprawling environs from here, and Monterrey's namesake mountains: Cerro de las Mitras (Miter Hill), Cerro del Topo Chico (Small Mole Hill), Cerro de

la Loma Larga (Long Slope Hill), La Huasteca, and, of course, Cerro de la Silla (or Saddle Hill), which rises above 1800-meters (or 5900-feet) - you'll also find Mexico's biggest monumental flag here.

This larger-than-life flag, which is a focal point of Mexican independence celebrations here in Nuevo León, weighs over 200-kilograms and measures 50 x 28.6 meters. That's one huge flapping green, white and red symbol of these Mexican states! And this atop a pole that stands slightly over 100-meters high and weighing over 120 tons itself. While that is impressive and a fabulous sight to see the vista of the surrounding environs is the reason to come here. And on a clear, sunny day like this day, the sky's the limit!



Next we made our way down to the Macroplaza, which is a 400,000 square meter court consisting of various museums, monuments, gardens, fountains and various other green-space accoutrements. It's anchored by the Palacio Municipal (Municipal Palace) on the south end at Constitución Avenue and the Antigua Palacio Federal (Antique Federal Palace) on the north end at Cinco-de-Mayo Avenue. The Macroplaza features a number of monuments and other



pedestrian zones, but the one item that fascinated me most was Fuente de Neptuno (the Fountain of Neptune), a beautiful bronze fountain that represents Neptune, the Roman god of the Sea (also formally known as Fuente de la Vida - the fountain of Life). After snapping a few pictures - I really love fountains - we made our way underground and I got to experience the metro system first hand.

We ducked underground at Zaragoza station (a stop on Line 2, or the Green Line) and rode it four stops up to Cuauhtémoc, switched lines to Line 1 (the yellow line) and took it all the way out to Estación Parque Fundidora, which is about 2 blocks from the Parque and, of course, is the site of the Grand Chapiteau. Metrorey is one of the more modern systems I've ever used (opening in 1991 and 1994 respectively) and it has a unique identifier for each of its stations, which I found very interesting: a logo.



The one at Cuauhtémoc, for example, is a stylized headshot of the important Aztec ruler of the same name. Parque Fundidora's logo has trees to represent the park. Other more interesting ones include: a phonograph for Edison station; a canon for the Felix U. Gomez station (since he was a Mexican Military General); a stylized head shot of Simón Bolívar (a liberator), for the station of the same name; a pictograph of a train under maintenance for the Talleres station, a flame and atom diagram for the Universidad station, and an obelisk to mark the Fundadores station.



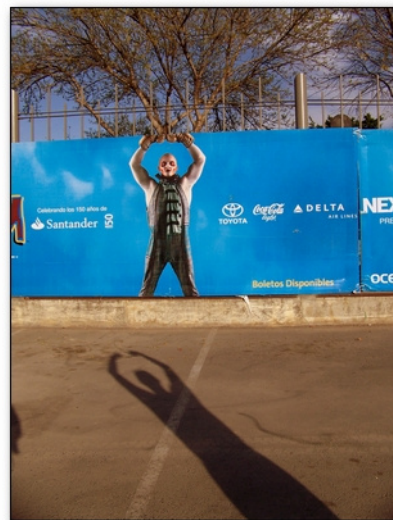
We took our leave of the metro and made our way across the road into Parque Fundidora, the sun still shining brightly overhead. Our destination at the parque, of course, was the Grand Chapiteau. And once we got on-site we immediately took more pictures of us next to the advertisement banners in all sorts of wacky stances and poses and--Oh, wait... did I neglect to mention that earlier?!

Banner pictures on-site were just a continuation of this morning's antics that were truly a three-ring circus all on its own. Let me explain:

On our way up to the Mirador del Obispado earlier in the morning, I spotted one of the very, very few advertisement banners for Quidam in Monterrey; crazy Rodolfo immediately slammed on the brakes and whipped out his digital camera. Snap! Snap! Flash! Snap! The next thing I know the SUV lurches round and comes to a rushed stop into a driveway nook about 10 paces from the banner. Rodolfo was already on foot before I could say "¿Qué tal?" ("What's up?"). At first I wondered what he had stopped for but then it hit me. He was going to get personal, up close shots!

The two of us then posed with glee in front of this particular banner, featuring the headless one himself (Quidam), holding his signature green umbrella. We took turns placing ourselves in front of the banner and then in place of the character (assuming the role). It was a blast! Some shots required us to stand in the middle of the road, which while not a busy thoroughfare, was still quite steady with traffic. But anything for Cirque du Soleil... right Rodolfo? (¡ay caramba!... he's trying to get me killed...)

The site itself was also covered with banners in several varieties: one with Quidam, one featuring Steven Ragatz as the character of Father, Olga Pikhienko the Hand-balancer (who was not going to be performing for personal reasons), one of Mark Ward being quirky John, and one of Viktor Katona as Boum Boum, the gloved one. And naturally we took our pictures with these banners too - again with Quidam pretending to hold his umbrella, one with Olga pretending to hold up her canes, and a third with Boum Boum. The third one I took a little differently: rather than stand next to the banner holding up my arms in the same pose as the character, I used the setting sun as a backdrop, and took the shot of my extended shadow on the ground in the same arms-over-head pose. It really turned out to be a neat picture!





Before long we made ourselves leave the Grand Chapiteau (Quidaaaaaaam!) and continued our explorations in the park. Our next stop was Horno 3 at the old Monterrey Foundry. This blast furnace was once part of the now defunct Monterrey Steel Foundry Company and was in use from 1900 until the company's bankruptcy in 1986. Two years later the park was born. Horno 3 is a museum these days, and you can take a trip to the top of this monstrosity for one spectacular view of the city. It's 130ft (40m) from ground-level and is

on a slated platform - so not only can you see all around but below you too; hold on! The incline chair (that seats about eight) will take you up to the top for about 80 pesos (approx \$8.00) and from there all of Monterrey opens up to you.

Below, while patrons explored the Foundry History Gallery (a look at the events which forged the steel industry in Mexico), the Steel Gallery (a look at a productive industrial processes, and the Blast Furnace show (a multi-sensorial show complete with stunning effects simulating the workings at No 3. Blast Furnace), Rodolfo and I were taking in the relative peace and quiet in the skies above the park. You really get a fantastic view of your surroundings from here including the fantastic 'M'-shaped Cerro de la Silla, my hotel (the Holiday Inn at Parque Fundidora) and the Grand Chapiteau itself (sitting next to Plaza Sesamo, a Sesame Street theme park.)

On the way back to the car, which was parked at the far end of the Macroplaza, Rodolfo and I took one of the most interesting and best modes of transportation in Monterrey: a boat on the Paseo Santa Lucia, an artificial water canal that connects Parque Fundidora 2.5-kilometers to the east with Museo de Historia/Plaza 400 (Museum of Mexican History) at the Macroplaza. Between the group of school kids singing and playing for the park crowd as we waited to get on the boat, and a dinghy filled with a Mexican instrumental quartet, and traversing this waterway in the twilight of sunset was such a delightful and relaxing cap to our afternoon. On the way you pass beyond the park, through beautiful fountains and other waterworks displays, around a whirlpool maker and finally into the water-filled Plaza 400 at the Macroplaza, entertained not only by the city lights around you but by the tour guide driving the boat. Fantastico!





But before running off to our vehicle, Rodolfo and I make one final stop along the Macroplaza: to the Palacio de Gobierno on the Explanada de los Hèros. This is the official seat of the Governor, or at least where his office is located, but it also serves as a Museum of local history and political development. The whole story of Nuevo León is adorned on the walls: you learn about what the early inhabitants were like, see some important artifacts of state, and see how the people of the region used to live.

One of the nice things you'll learn here is the meaning behind the coat of arms. Since my Spanish was rather rusty, I could not appreciate the full story so I looked it up later. According to the Encyclopedia of Mexican States, "The coat of arms of Nuevo León is made up [of] four squares. Six bees representing the hard-working nature of the local citizens are at the top. The upper-left square features a picture of the sun over La Silla Hill (a landmark that often symbolizes the state) with an orange tree. In the upper right-hand square a crowned lion is [featured] ready to attack. In the lower-left there is a picture of the San Francisco convent. On the lower-right five smoking chimneys represent area industry. The weapons around the border represent both native warriors and Spanish conquerors." And then there's the state's motto: *Sempre Ascendens* (Always Rising). Cool!

Seeing the palace lit up at night is just as brilliant. And if you're looking to connect with the young locals, the surrounding esplanade is a wonderful place to hang out. Also be sure to look for a statue of a stylized horse... he's very popular!

Then, after checking into my hotel and resting for merely a moment, Rodolfo and I were back on foot across the parque toward the Grand Chapiteau...

We were ready for Quidam.

/// QUIDAM... QUIDAM!

Tendré alguna vez la valentía de mi indignación?

Me hubiera gustado no morir.

Me hubiera gustado no crecer nunca.

Hubiera querido romperme el alma.

Hubiera querido desterrar todas las penas enterradas.

Deso que lo quieran con locura.

Me hubiera gustado rasgar con una voz áspera la superficie demasiado lisa de nuestras buenas intenciones.

From the moment John quietly appears to us and slips into his purple coat hanging neatly upon the coat-rack on stage, we're not quite sure what to make of this zany world we find ourselves in.

Many words have been used to describe Cirque du Soleil's Quidam over the years - artistic, cinematic, poignant, touching, agonizing, disturbing, striking, alluring and beautiful - and regardless of which of these words you choose, it is hard to deny that Quidam is one of those quintessential productions that strikes a raw emotional chord within each of us, one that is too hard to dismiss.



Quidam, which comes from the Latin for "a nameless passerby" marks Cirque du Soleil's ninth production, premiering 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. "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 realm 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.

We find the space before us is set as a typical family sitting room - two slanted, metallic chairs, a curvy floor lamp, a birdcage (with a red ball perched in the bird's spot), an old-style transistor radio sitting comfortably upon a side table, and a swirl-patterned throw-rug are dotted about - and we watch as John busies himself about this rather unremarkable room.

The radio catches John's eye, however, and he saunters over, flipping it on and filling the big-top with a nice, light tango. Satisfied with his selection, John then proceeds to run amok: carousing with audience members as they come through the doorway, playing with their hair (or lack-thereof in some cases), taking patrons on a wild goose chase, eating others' popcorn and generally being a playful nuisance.

When John returns to the radio and attempts to find something new to lift our spirits we see what kind of a ham John really aspires to be.

Passing through the frequencies, he lands upon a station playing the soothing notes of "Kumbalawé", a song from Saltimbanco, an older (chronologically speaking) Cirque du Soleil show.

When that does not elicit a response from his audience, he turns the dial and blasts the harsh overture of "Eclipse" from Nouvelle Expérience (an even older Cirque du Soleil show, chronologically speaking).

Satisfied that he's once again captured our attention, he changes the dial quickly and finds a station playing the title song from Alegría. Everyone in the big-top recognizes this song and they begin to clap and cheer. John doesn't think highly of this, however, and he clamps his nose shut in disgust (pee-you!) then mock gags himself with his index finger. (I love it!)

Eventually John advises us of the rules to be followed under the Grand Chapiteau (en español) and then the world turns dark and still.

Until...

click

The floor-lamp in the middle of the room suddenly flickers to life and we find ourselves in observance of Zoë and family on a typical day, seated comfortably in their sitting room (the room we saw as we entered the Big Top). Dad is content reading his newspaper and avoiding everything around him. Mom is expressionless, vacantly staring out into the nothingness of space while clutching that old transistor radio. Zoë, the child, is bored and in her attempt to gain her parents' attention, hopscotch's across the floor in front of them. But when they pay her no notice, Zoë becomes despondent and she wanders around the room - tracing a message on an imaginary window, running her finger across the family bird cage. But just when she thinks about turning off the light and returning to her room to sulk...

There's a knock on the front door.

Startled, Zoë runs over to see who it could be, but what she finds on the other side frightens her - there's a headless man with an umbrella on her doorstep! This man enters and she backpedals into the room. She watches him silently then with a flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder, he drops his hat in the middle of the room and leaves. Frightened, yet undeniably curious, Zoë picks up the hat, holds it up to her ear and smiles at the whimsical sounds coming from within. Checking Mom and Dad to see if they're watching, she tentatively places the hat upon her head. In the moment the hat comes to rest upon her brow, Zoë's world comes alive - Mom, Dad and the entire living room slowly float away and Zoë (with us) becomes swept up into the universe of Quidam!

For those unfamiliar with the show, the performance is broken up into two one-hour halves with a 30-minute intermission between the two, and flows in the following manner: German Wheel, Diabolos, Aerial Contortion in Silk, Skipping Ropes, Aerial Hoops, (Intermission), Hand Balancing, Spanish Webs, Statue (Vis Versa), Cloud Swing, and Banquine.

All too soon the red proscenium-like curtains of Quidam float into place, signaling that the end is near. Zoë makes her re-appearance through a man-hole with the assistance of our resident clown (who is very funny, btw!) and she rejoins her family, who has finally taken

note of the wondrous world around them. The Generics, androgynous characters dressed in white that appear in and disappear from the world of Quidam at will, have reappeared and have begun (with the assistance of John and Fritz) an energetic, ballet of happiness - dancing with each other, playing with one another and hopping, skipping and jumping around.

But a loud thunder crack sends them all to the stage where they lay motionless, lifeless and the Family is puzzled and insecure.

Quidam, who had been watching the final scene unfold from the depths of the stage, steps forward now to reclaim his blue bowler hat from Zoë; she is startled and becomes exasperated - she realizes he has come to take this fantastical world away from her! But a glance to the side shows her that the journey is not yet over - her family appears reanimated and full of life, which is what she wanted most. So, very reluctantly Zoë displaces the hat from her head, holds it in her arms and looks around one last time. Her white-garbed friends, who have been laying there lifeless, are now staring directly at her! She gently hands Quidam the hat, re-joins her newly-restored family and begins to sing (the signature song of the show.)

John removes the dad's shoes and returns them to him (he stepped into them just after the living room floated away, figuratively taking his place) and the Generics come alive, slowly filling the edges of the stage. And once encapsulating the entire stage - and thus closing off the world of Quidam to us - they move to zipper away their hoods to reveal who they really are... the colorful artists in the show!

Wow!

Although our performance was not status quo, and many of the traditional pieces, character and story queues, and even a couple of the acts were missing (both Hand-Balancing and Statue were out, but Steven Ragatz's juggling act was in); experiencing Quidam again under the Grand Chapiteau was a treat unsurpassed and the show still managed to rend my soul on more than one occasion. It was hard to leave the big top at the show's finale.



so after a quick hand-shake and congrats on a good show, they were off again.

After the evening's performance, Rodolfo and I hung around the sites exit to see if we could chat with some of the artists who were quickly trying to escape to catch their shuttle bus that would take them back to their hotel. (We came to find out there were only two shuttle runs: just after the show and then an hour later. Most of the artists and crew didn't want to be left behind for that second shuttle!); a few stopped and chatted with us. Most of these artists were friends of Rodolfo's and were glad to see him, but couldn't stop for a long conversation,

Many artists went by in a blur and thus the names of many escape me, but we did see Olga walk by, the German Wheel artist, the man who played Boum-Boum, the entire Spanish Webs gang and countless others. Once the bus took off so did Rodolfo and I.

/// NOW I'VE REALLY BEEN TO MEXICO

Come Sunday morning, as the two of us set off once again to explore the Macroplaza of Zona Centro, my guide said something very peculiar to me: I had not yet been to Mexico.

What?

"You've not been to Mexico," he said "until you've been to Vips!"

Okay, vamonos!

Vips? What is a Vips?



VIPS, as it turns out, is a Mexican eatery chain owned and operated by Wal-Mart Mexico that specializes in breakfasts, lunches and dinners with - what else - a Mexican flair. It's one of Mexico's more famous chains (you can find more information at <http://www.vips.com.mx>), and it is said you've only really been to Mexico once you've eaten at a VIPS. Why? Because everyone has eaten at VIPS and, like McDonalds, they're everywhere! Well... almost. I had a more traditional Mexican breakfast of soft tortias and salsa with melted cheese and sour cream on top, but you could get more traditional North American breakfast items such as: eggs, pancakes, waffles, bacon, etc. Why would you, though?

And while we waited for our food Rodolfo and I reminisced about Quidam.

Both he and I were disappointed that the Statue act was missing from the previous night's show. While we didn't know why it was missing, we both agreed the act was a seminal piece of Quidam and it's hard to see the show continue in its absence. So many pieces of Quidam's theme and story congregate based on this presentation so most of the second-half of the show was quite disjointed. At least, we both said, we were able to see Ragatz perform his juggling act and hear "Rivage" live under the big top again.

We also talked about how we royally scared Boum-Boum. As a finale to the Diabolo's act (which comes just prior to Tissue (or Aerial Contortion in Silk), a joyful celebration commences with streamers of blue and white raining down upon the stage and a dance and a jig by a few of the Egare class of characters. But Boum Boum, the ghastly gloved figure, makes a short life out of the celebration - he hates it - and comes right on point to bellow a gut wrenching scream of anguish, silencing the world around him. What causes this piercing call for help I do not know, but just as soon as he was done with his scream, Rodolfo

and I yelled right back. This appeared to take Boum-Boum off guard; he became frightened and immediately ran away like a scared little boy! (Actually, if an audience member does yell back he will run away, rather than stand triumphant and defiant. But it was fun!)

And speaking of the Tissue act, it's another one of our favorite parts of the night's show. At that time of the show the world of Quidam turns stranger yet, and even more dark:

John re-appears with a megaphone in his hand, barking gibberish orders to various personages left on stage. Zoë sits dejected on a giant swing, slowly swinging herself back and forth observing the chaos around her. Her father is suspended in mid-air, unaware that he is so, and takes the paper from around his face and tears it up, allowing its torn pieces to fall below him. And at the sound of wind, Fritz gets down on all fours and howls at the moon. And through this fantastical kaleidoscope of abstraction, a strip of red silk floats into view and unfurls across the stage; swept up within it is the contorted body of Isabelle Vaudelle, contortionist extraordinaire.

She climbs, twists, and slides through the silk slowly and deliberately at first, but thunderclaps signal a tense change and her movements become fast, chaotic and violent. And just when it seems she can not hang on any longer, her body suddenly drops and she becomes entangled within the silk. Her body flails for a moment... and again... and then becomes limp and lifeless. She has hung herself in the red silk.

The moment her body began to flail, goose-bumps trickled down my arms and I trembled in uncontrollable shivers. Vaudelle's given sacrifice in congruence with the hauntingly beautiful "Let Me Fall" wrenched at my insides. I stared, transfixed with mouth agape (for the first time), watching the entire scene unfold. This act has never affected me so, but it was just so powerful and so sad and so poignant, especially when the father came and carried her away from her misery, I couldn't help it.

If the phantasmagorical yet enormously powerful opening of the show doesn't touch you emotionally (doesn't that give you chills? It does me!), or the hauntingly beautiful tissue act, perhaps the melancholic conclusion to the first half of the show will touch you (it's probably the third best emotional moment for me in the entire show):

A thunderclap tears through the big-top. Rain is falling somewhere just off stage, the sound of a small hand-bell chimes in the distance, and a haunting male voice fills the void. Ominous creatures dressed in white appear and fill the stage, taking their rest. Zoë's Mom is off to the side clutching onto a huge red balloon while Zoë's Dad is dangling overhead with the birdcage in his hand seemingly ready to encapsulate something. At the sound of another chime Zoë looks up and is compelled to release her balloon; she does so and her father captures it, receding into the darkness. And then the entire sky is filled with red as the male voice comes to a crescendo, and the nameless quidams stir releasing their own troubled souls.

One day I'm going to bring my own red balloon to let go right along with them...

Oh, food!

With our bellies full, we set off once again to explore the Zona Central of Monterrey, but unfortunately the weather wasn't nearly as cooperative (or nice) - it turned cloudy, windy and cold. The worst part of it, though, was being ill prepared for the dip in temperature. All I had with me were short-sleeved T-shirts and shorts - typical Florida (and all points south) attire!

Brr!

Regardless of the weather, the two of us ended up on the streets of Monterrey, walking to our second destination of the day: MARCO.



MARCO, short for Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (or the Contemporary Art Museum of Monterrey) is located on the corner of Zuazua and Ocampo Centro and offers temporary exhibits of the most outstanding new Latin American contemporary art around. Rodolfo took me on a tour of the "Mexican Room" where he showed me some outstanding paintings and drawings from such Mexican artists as Diego Creek, Carlos Mérida and Left Maria, many of which touched upon the various socio-political topics of the time. But political

paintings weren't the majority here: wonderful mosaics of nature and pencil-art were also on display. I highly recommend MARCO to experience the very singular and distinct style of Mexican art. It's great!

Next up was the Museo de Historia Mexicana (or the Mexican History Museum). This place is a treasure trove of exploration, art and enlightenment for those interested in the history of this land. At this museum you'll find temporary and permanent exhibits divided into five areas which represent important periods in Mexican history: The initial creation of these lands ("Earth"), the Aztec and Mayan civilizations ("Ancient Mexico"), the Spanish conquistadores and the arrival of the Europeans ("The Viceroy Period"), the Spanish/American wars ("19th Century") and modern democratic Mexico ("Modern Mexico").

While I am not usually a museum-goer, this particular museum brings out a fascinating tale and places Mexican history into perspective, a story that an outsider seldom appreciates.

For example, did you know that every schoolchild in Mexico must learn to count via the old Maya way using the dots and bars system? While simple on the surface, the Maya system of counting used a base-20 counting system intermixed with a base-5 system. Numbers one through 19 are relatively easy to discern, but after 19 the system changes. Rather than writing them using the same bars and dots, now they are written in powers of twenty. Wikipedia explains it thusly: "For example, thirty-three would be written as one dot above three dots, which are in turn

atop two lines. The first dot represents "one twenty" or " 1×20 ", which is added to three dots and two bars, or thirteen. Therefore, $(1 \times 20) + 13 = 33$. Upon reaching 400, another row is started. The number 429 would be written as one dot above one dot above four dots and a bar, or $(1 \times 400) + (1 \times 20) + 9 = 429$."

Besides learning how to count Maya style, I also learned about Mexico's tri-color flag and the significance (and story) behind the coat-of-arms featured prominently in its center:

The flag's colors actually have two meanings these days. Originally the colors stood for Independencia (Green), Religión (White), and Unión (Red), but now stand for Hope, Unity and Religion respectively. The coat-of-arms is a scene inspired by an Aztec legend regarding the founding of Tenochtitlán (the ancient capital of the Aztec civilization where Mexico City now stands). According to legend, the nomadic Aztecs wandered throughout the Mexican lands searching for the sign that would indicate where their capital would be built. The sign, said war-god Huizilopochtli, was to be an eagle holding a serpent perched atop a nopal (a form of cactus) in the middle of a lake. After many years of wandering the tribe found this promised sign in the middle of Lake Texcoco and founded the city we know today as Mexico City. And it's this image we see as the country's coat-of-arms.

But...

Much like the finale of *Quidam*, all too soon my journey had to come to a close. And once I'd learned a bit about Mexican history at the Museo de Historia Mexicana, it was time to return to the airport and depart Monterrey.

I wish to wholeheartedly thank Rodolfo Elizondo for being my friend and guide during my quick stay in Mexico. I wish above all else I could've had more time there, seeing the show again and tour more of Monterrey; alas it was not meant to be. But I do know this: I will not hesitate to travel to Monterrey or anywhere in Mexico in the future.



So the next time Cirque is in Mexico I may just catch a plane!



SEPTEMBER 2008

« No Limits on Adventure! »

Celebri, Part 2: SEA & LAS



You may have heard about it in passing but just what is a *Celebri*?

From the Italian, *Celebri!* is a coming together of friends to *celebrate* Cirque du Soleil in various geographical settings. By supporting a small reunion multiple times a year, *Celebri!* desires to ensnare the jubilant, ecstatic, and euphoric feelings that well up inside each avid Cirque du Soleil fan and nurture that festivity into a joyous and wonderful occasion with friends and fellow fans alike.

And for just over a year now, Rich Alford and I have hosted a couple such *Celebri*'s around the United States. Each event is different, complete with its own soul and tale to tell. Experience with us now the tales of the first next two adventures: Seattle, Washington (SEA) and Las Vegas, Nevada (LAS)...

* * *

Celebri! SEA: "un funerale a Seattle!" ///

WHERE: Seattle, Washington (USA)

WHAT: Cirque du Soleil's Corteo & Teatro Zinzanni

WHEN: May.02.2008 - May.04.2008

Any time Cirque du Soleil rolls into the Seattle area, Keith Johnson and Rich Alford, good friends and fellow CirqueCon conceptors who live in the area, get a group of friends and family together to see the show. Usually one or the other hosts a pre-show party at their house before-hand, inviting Cirque fans and friends over for drinks and tapas to kick-start a festive mood. For Dralion in 2002 and Alegría in 2004, Keith hosted the gathering at his place; for Varekai in 2006 the party shifted to Richie's Le Petite Chapiteau. And when Corteo rolled into Seattle in May 2008, Rich once again hosted at his yellow-colored bachelor pad in Bothel, north of the site in Marymoor Park. There he had set up for us a wonderful menu of Tapis Rouge proportions! It was the promise of a wonderful adventure...



On Friday, I spent most of my time with Heather and Jim (CirqueCon alums from New York's Long Island) GeoCaching around the city (my first experience) and seeing the sights this town had to offer. Our first search took us to Kubota, a Japanese gardens in a residential area of town. There we hunted (and found) a multi-cache by gathering the information requested from the gardens' guide and using those answers to calculate the cache's final location GPS coordinates. With the flowers in bloom, and a crisp, cool morning air, meandering around the gardens was definitely a treat. And I took some good pictures to boot! The second cache was a quickie along side the highway, which ended up being more trouble than it was worth (for me that is, Heather and Jim loved climbing in the underbrush on the hill-side and traipsing through the woods...). We found it, though,

and made our way back to the car virtually unscathed. The third, another multi-cache, was hidden at Olympic Sculpture Park, and I must say that I preferred exploring the park in this way. It made the time there very interesting and fun. The sculptures are very abstract (for me) but viewing the pieces while also solving the puzzle was the best way to experience it.



There are many different metallic sculptures down at the park, but a small handful stood out. One, called "Wake", is a 300-ton structure spanning 125-feet composed of curved steel set within a small rock/sand garden. Although at first you might think of a ship's looming hull upon first glance, upon closer inspection you might find yourself in the middle of a mountain ridge or perhaps lost in a strange, new world. You're encouraged to walk amongst the warped structure but don't touch (although others most certainly have), as this artists wishes for us to participate in his undulating metallic creation. Another, called "Typewriter Erase, Scale X" is exactly as described: an overblown piece of equipment that may have come from our deepest, darkest nightmares (at least of those who may have had to use one of these in the past and remember it "fondly", smaller version of course). But don't let the horrors of past usage come to mind, instead, look upon this pop icon fondly: as a harbinger of whimsical folly "like a wild-haired kid on a runaway unicycle" according to the Seattle Times. I like that much better! In "Love and Loss", you might first be attracted here by spotting by a rotating ampersand ("&") symbol and attempt to ascertain what connection it has to the tree, bench and stone tables laid out around it. But if you stake a step back and follow the strips of white paint with your eye, you'll find the place where love and loss intersect. It's a poignant piece to reflect on.



Heather, Jim and I even stopped by ground zero of the geo-caching movement - Groundspeak - for an intimate and private tour of the facility, a chance to get at their private stash, and meet one of the founders. Boy was I thrust into the Geocaching world, or what? But I loved it!



The evening was capped off by a wonderful performance of Teatro ZinZanni whereby most sat in attendance, including: Rich, Jim, Heather, Eric, Keith, Lucy, Barb, Shelly, and myself. "A Suitcase Named Desire" was the theme of the show, and here's a little bit about it: Master illusionist Voronin returns to the tent, his travel-stained trunk bursting with new secrets and surprises. With the help of two mysterious cohorts - the

perfectly Parisian contortionist Aurelia Cats and the sexy, snakelike juggler Viktor Kee, Voronin slowly enchants the entire tent. Join us as Madame ZinZanni (London's West End singing sensation Melanie Stace) and her merry band of waiters, clowns and acrobats including audience favorites trapeze artists Duo Artemiev, rally to defend Teatro ZinZanni in the name of Love, Chaos and Dinner!

Wait, Viktor Kee?

The same Viktor Kee, master juggler, from Dralion?

Yes! And he came over to our table for a while and chatted!

Saturday was spent in and around the Emerald City with Heather and Jim. In the early morning we made our way down to Pike Place Market to catch the flying fish. While there wasn't any fish-a-flying, I did get a chance to grab an espresso drink at the very first Starbucks store. It was busy, yes, but well worth the time and effort. I'm a fan, what can I say? Later on we took Bill Spidel's famous Seattle Underground Tour, a trip into the subterranean passages that were once the



main roadways and first-floor storefronts of old downtown Seattle. It was actually very interesting and informative. Who knew Seattle and Walt Disney World had so much in common -- it's built on the "Second Floor" too! Then it was down to the site of the 1962 World's Fair - Seattle Center - and the Pacific-Northwest's most prominent landmark: The Space Needle. While neither Heather, Jim or I went up to the observation deck this go-round (I've been up before), we did have a good time in the shop trying on funny sun-glasses and taking pictures of ourselves, and wandering about the grounds looking for other micro-caches. (Of course!)



By late afternoon, we were rolling into Rich's driveway for a wake, er, I mean the Corteo Pre-show party. Master Chef Rich Alford dazzled our taste buds and enlightened our souls with his original, masterful tapas concoctions. Just what was on the menu? Behold! Garlic and Mustard Grilled Filet Mignon, Grilled Pork Tenderloin with Ginger Dipping Sauce, and Bacon Wrapped Chicken Breast with Dijon Dipping Sauce, Thai Chicken

Bite with Spicy Peanut Sauce, Filet Mignon Bite on Crostini with Bleu Cheese Sauce, Cream Cheese Empanada with Puff Pastry, Garlic Shrimp Shots, Cream Cheese Brownies, and more!

And food wasn't the only surprise on the menu -- Quidam astonished everyone by making an unscripted, personal appearance! (Hint: It was me!) For Keith Johnson's Cirque-themed wedding back in August 2002 I played costumed character Quidam, which was as great representation of Cirque's version. And we like to get him out every now and then...

Many of the CirqueCon crowd were on-hand: Keith Johnson and LouAnna Valentine (from Seattle, Washington), Barb Houde and Shelly Blakeslee (from Missoula, Montana), Rolf and Karen Mogster (from Seattle, Washington), Eric Meadows (from Atlanta, Georgia), Heather and Jim (from Baldwin, New York), and a hand-full of others I had never met before! After feeding heartily, we made our way to the blue-and-yellow swirled Grand Chapiteau where many of the group would be taking in Corteo for the first time.

Excitement coursed through the group the moment our eyes fell upon Corteo's canvas home. Corteo, which means "cortege" in Italian, combines the craft of the actor with the prowess of the acrobat to plunge the audience into a world of playfulness and spontaneity situated in a mysterious area between Heaven and Earth. Corteo is a grand procession, a festive parade imagined by a clown.

Juxtaposing the large with the small, the ridiculous with the tragic and the magic of perfection with the charm of imperfection, the show highlights the strength and fragility of the clown, as well as his wisdom and kindness, to illustrate the portion of humanity that is within each of us. The clown is Everyman, a cunning idiot, a colorful loser who shines a light on all that is difficult and beautiful in life. Corteo evokes the full spectrum of emotion and experience: love, friendship, pain, joy, wisdom, beauty, life and even death. Corteo, a timeless revel in which illusion teases reality.



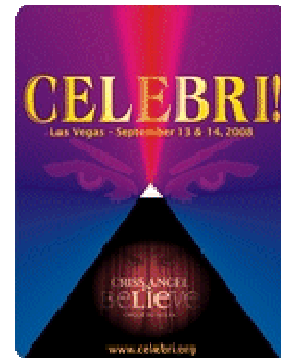
By the end we were all singing with friendship, love and joy! The weekend was closed out with a fabulous brunch buffet at Salty's on Alki Beach with Rich, Heather and Jim. It was yoooooooooooooooooooo!

Celebri! LAS: "beLIEve it!" ///

WHERE: Las Vegas, Nevada (USA)

WHAT: Criss Angel BELIEVE & More

WHEN: Sep.12.2008 - Sep.14.2008



When Cirque du Soleil announced the premiere date for their newest spectacle in Las Vegas - Criss Angel BELIEVE - Rich and I were all about grabbing tickets to this and other Cirque du Soleil shows as quickly as we could and organize the next Celebri! What better reason do you need to get together with friends and other Cirque du Soleil fans than the premiere of a brand new show, right?



Of course, Rich and I had an ulterior motive - we already had an invite to BELIEVE's Gala Premiere and after-show party being held on September 12th (which Rich won during CirqueCon 2006 in Las Vegas - I was his "date"), so why not just stay in town and take in other shows? That was the plan when we began the endeavor; however, as you may know delays at BELIEVE pushed the premiere off our weekend and later delays even pushed off the previews -- so we never even got to see the show!

(We were comp'd Carrot Top instead, who needs no kind of introduction.)

But that doesn't mean good times weren't had.

We made the best of some of the more unique attractions that the Las Vegas area had to offer.

Over at the Wynn, which is a fabulously appointed casino-hotel by mogul Steve Wynn (he previously owned Mirage Resorts, which built The Mirage, Treasure Island and Bellagio), you'll find its flagship Ferrari-Maserati car dealership. While you have to have a lot of money to own one of these sports cars, it only takes \$10 to take a peek at them.

They are truly magnificent machines, but don't touch! Hell, don't even breathe on them. But if you are so inclined, take a seat in one specially set aside for public use... and smile: you're on candid camera! While the Wynn is a departure from the Mirage and Treasure Island, you'll still find a little bit of the Bellagio here. And if you plan to stick around, try Sugar and Ice over in the Esplanade. It has a great selection of comfort foods for lunch (and, yes, gelato too!) Delicious doesn't even begin to describe this little café!





In an attempt to "get out of the city", Rich and I took a little road trip to nearby Valley of Fire state park, located 50 miles northeast of Las Vegas. As Nevada's oldest state park, it offers a wealth of history and intrigue for the casual explorer. Many come for the red sandstone formations that give the area its name, but did you know that the area was once inhabited in prehistoric times? The ancient Pueblos (the Anasazi) once called Valley of Fire home, which you'll find evidence of all around. Including, but not limited too their rock art, which you can view at various pull offs and locations within. It's a great little day trip to make, and quite picturesque if you like desert locales. Consequently, Valley of Fire state park is often used by the Motion

Picture industry. Captain Kirk fell to his death here in Star Trek: Generations and Autobots were seen driving along roadways in Michael Bay's Transformers film. For a Cirque du Soleil connection, programme photos of Mystère's characters were shot here and it's a location where huge cast parties are sometimes held.





Back in town, Madame Tussauds at the Venetian is a cool way to spend an hour or so. At this museum, you can wax poetically with your favorite celebrities, including: the Rat Pack, Diana Ross, Cher, Elton John, Elvis, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Judy Garland, Liberace, Pavarotti, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Wayne Newton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Brad Pitt, George Clooney, The Rock, Humphrey Bogart, Hugh Hefner, Jenna Jameson, Patrick Stewart, The Blue Man Group,

Sean Connery, Harrison Ford (as Indiana Jones), Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, and Siegfried & Roy, amongst many, many others. And unlike many other museums where their hands-off policy is strictly enforced, here you're encouraged to browse, touch and get involved in the scenes. Madame Tussauds at the Venetian truly is a unique Las Vegas attraction.

Looking for something a little more controversial? Try BODIES, the Exhibition at the Luxor if you can stomach it. Rich and I were given free tickets to the presentation due to the BELIEVE schedule debacle, and although Rich chose not to use his, I couldn't resist - I'd always wanted to see what this was like! For the uninitiated, BODIES showcases dissected human bodies and its multiple systems in various ways preserved through a special polymer process that prevents decay. These are real human specimens, not fakes, which convey the controversial nature of this exhibit; but it's fascinating! You'll not only learn about, but see our skeletal system, muscular, nervous and circulatory systems; digestive, respiratory and urinary systems; and, yes, the reproductive system (including fetal development in its various phases). Through successive rooms you'll find specimens arranged performing various activities (such as basketball, tennis, discus throwing, running, and the like), intestines stretched out from end to end, skulls and skeletons showcasing various medical procedures, the polluted lungs of a smoker, the brain and various arteries and veins. It really is an enthralling display.



And last but not least, Titanic: The Artifact Exhibit over at Tropicana offers an interesting experience for those who are fans of the ill-fated ship and its journey. There are more than 300 authentic artifacts on display that have been brought up to sea level from the Titanic herself. You'll have to traverse a huge portion of the casino and the hotel to get to it, and Jack and Rose won't be there to greet you upon arrival, but you can see a 1st class cabin, check out a re-creation of

the Boiler Room, see sections of the ship's hull, and go out on deck the evening of the infamous iceberg strike. For a personal connection, you're handed a boarding pass with a passenger's name on it that matches your birthday.

Of course, we attended Cirque du Soleil shows as well.

Rich and I had an interesting time over at Zumanity. Neither one of us could get into Eddie, the show's newest emcee. Eddie took over the role from phenom Joey Arias earlier this year replacing Joey's raw and sometimes flamboyantly raunchy dialogue with a more toned-down, baby-doll-esque discourse. While definitely adequate, I must say there's no one who can replace Joey Arias in that role. The show itself was lukewarm at best. Most of the acts were found within and generally enjoyable; however, Aerial Tissue with Alan and Olga (one of my favorites) did not perform, it was replaced by Roue Cyr instead. Jonas Woolverton is the new Cyr Wheel artist and came to Cirque du Soleil from Cirque Eloize. From what I understand (although I've not seen the production), Jonas performed the number in Eloize's "Rain" production. Overall we left Zumanity a little limp.



At "O", we had excellent seats three rows from the front, just on the left-hand side, but were amidst a chatty group of people, which ultimately detracted from our enjoyment of the show. KÀ was dark, unfortunately, so we couldn't share in the rescue of the twins, but LOVE was on. Regrettably a technical glitch with the rollerblade set automation stopped the show (Help! I need somebody!). The cast took it in stride (as did the audience) but the sudden break was so jarring that I

could no longer turn on, tune in, and drop out. The show went on after about 15 minutes, but the mood was forever spoiled.

Over at Mystère something wonderful happened. After so many years of watching others get the opportunity to be placed front and center at a Cirque du Soleil show, I finally got my 15 minutes of fame. There are some within our special group of friends who can lay the same claim, some who have been at the mercy of the Generics in Quidam, or taken hostage by the Les Cons in La Nouba, or even subjected to the pickpocket in Koozå. My friend Rich had this very same honor not but two years previous (almost to the day). He had the dubious honor of claiming 6057, but 6992 was mine - tonight I became an honorary inductee; an official member of... "THE POPPA CLUB!" And it was an experience I will forever cherish.

Besides becoming Papa for the evening, our experiences with Cirque du Soleil at the Luxor were equally exciting, if you can BELIEVE that. For hanging on the outside of the pyramid was a ginormous banner advertising Criss Angel BELIEVE at the hotel and we just had to have a picture, or two, or twelve!

Spotting it from our rental car while driving down the Strip was our first introduction to the huge banner, and in hindsight we probably should have just pulled over at that moment and taken some shots then, but as the rules that govern hindsight go, you don't realize that until much, much later. Rather we came upon the bright idea of capturing a picture or two of the huge banner upon visiting the Luxor; however, one of the problems with photographing something that is unusually large is that it's really huge up close. So our first idea was to snap the photo from outside by the obelisk - that was far enough away to get most of the hotel in the camera's frame.



Or so we thought.

In order to get better shots of the banner (which included all of the pyramid, the sphinx and the obelisk), we needed to get even further back - but the sidewalk was as far as we could go. Not to be deterred, we wondered then, could we get across the street somehow? Upon first glance though there weren't any traffic lights or cross-walks within easy reach or at least not ones we wanted to walk a half-mile down to just to cross, so what to do?

"Do you think we can make a run for it?"

Can you imagine us sprinting across Las Vegas Boulevard just to get a picture? Sure, why not; we did! And in the process I learned something about Vegas I didn't know, but should have figured: did you know the grass in the median is not real grass, but Astroturf? Oh yeah! And our pictures turned out great!



These pictures speak a thousand words.



SEPTEMBER 2008

« A Member of the Poppa Club »

My 'fifteen minutes' at Mystère

"Are you a plant?"

"Me? No!"

"Did you know that was going to happen tonight?"

YES! I can't believe it's finally happened.

You know, some fans have had the dubious honor of being at the mercy of the Generics in Quidam, or taken hostage by the Les Cons in La Nouba, had a gunfight with Eddie at Saltimbanco, or even subjected to the pickpocket in Koozâ, but not me. Even after I've placed myself "in harm's way", virtually guaranteeing my selection, I've been passed up - continuously. Was there something wrong with me, I had often wondered? Did I not look the part? But now, after so many years of watching others have the opportunity and pride of being front and center at a show in animation, I finally received my 15 minutes of fame. Tonight I became an honorary inductee; an official member of... "THE POPPA CLUB!"

And it is an experience I will forever cherish.

* * *

What lead me to the Mystère Theater at this time and place was set some months earlier. When Cirque du Soleil announced the premiere date for their newest spectacle in Las Vegas - Criss Angel BELIEVE - my friend Rich Alford and I were all about grabbing tickets to this and the other Cirque du Soleil shows as quickly as we could. As founders and organizers of gatherings for Cirque du Soleil fans, we were eager to hold our next *Celebri!* What better reason do you need to come together with friends and other Cirque du Soleil fans than the premiere of a brand new show?

Rich and I had an ulterior motive, of course - we already had an invite to BELIEVE's Gala Premiere and after-show party being held on September 12th (which Rich won during CirqueCon 2006 in Las Vegas - I was to be his "date"), so why not just stay in town, take in other shows and be with friends? That was the plan when we began the endeavor, but delays at BELIEVE pushed the premiere off our announced weekend and later delays even pushed off the previews -- so while we were met in Vegas, neither of us would actually get to see the show we were originally there to see!

Be that as it may, by the time we sat in for *Mystère*, the delays were the furthest thing from my mind. After a while I had a rather large man-baby in front of me, giggling madly, and bouncing a big red rubber ball...

I sat nervously awaiting its receipt.

Being familiar with *Mystère* (it is my most favorite Cirque du Soleil show) I knew that the front row in the center section was the sweetest spot for audience participation. And not just any involvement – the chance to become Bébé's "poppa", to be picked on for the entire show, to get up on stage with the cast and not just look stupid, but actually "perform" with them! After watching countless other Cirque du Soleil patrons and fans alike hauled on-stage for this amazing experience (and missing it a couple of times myself), I yearned for this opportunity. So when the big red ball finally came my way, I was so anxious I could hardly move.



"It's yours! It's yours! Go get it!" Rich exclaimed as quietly as he could, seated next to me.

I was hesitating. I didn't want to show I was *that* eager.

But after a pause, when it seemed no one else was going to jump up and return Bébé's ball, I rushed right in, hoisted it triumphantly over my head (hoped that I wouldn't fall backwards) and tossed it back, just as it had been tossed over to me.

Bébé Francois giggled and recovered his big red toy.

Bounce. Bounce. Giggle. Bounce.

From experience I knew I wasn't yet chosen. He could still decide to pitch it off in another direction or even leave in a fit. If he tossed it back at me I was in. I would be poppa for the night. If he didn't... well... at least I was one step closer than I had ever been before. My heart was pounding harshly inside my chest. Breath grew painfully short. Sweat was dripping precariously from my brow. I was so many states of emotion at once I could hardly sit still!

Was it to be?

From the moment Rich and I stepped into the *Mystère* theater, I felt this fantastic, electric buzz; something that I can only describe as acute excitement. We'd already been bothered once -- our seat neighbors, who were also fellow Floridians (from Orlando), had been chosen by resident clown "Le Petit" to experience the show from outside of the theater. So it seemed as if 103-A-2 would wind up being the best spot.

Bounce. Bounce. Giggle. Bounce.

Gawd, now flashes of Rich's prior experience began to float across my mind -- what if he played me like the girl baby played Rich? Tossing the ball somewhere else after seemingly selecting him? Oh man, I couldn't take it!

But then he raised it over his head again and tossed it...

And it came right back to me!

I scrambled to bounce it back to him; I was excited!

"PAPPA!"

Everyone laughed. I cheered! Hooray!



He scrambled over in little baby feet, arms open wide and a huge smile on his bonnet-tied head. Here was the part he'd come down to the railing and try to give me a hug, only to spray me with his baby bottle instead. I knew the routine having seen the show a half-dozen times before, so I braced myself for it while hamming it up for the audience. Yet, rather than come down to the railing, Béb  Franco s just stood in the middle of the stage.

His arms held out wide waiting for a hug. Whaaaaaaat?

"Okay," I thought. "What's gonna happen now?" So I stood my ground, waiting for him to make the next move.

B b  held out his arms again and motioned me up on stage. So up I went.

Step 1. Step 2. Step 3. I held out my arms ready to embrace my new "child" when at that moment...

SQUIRRRRRRRRRT! SQUIRRRRRRRT! SQUIRRT! SQUIRRT!

Giggle! Tee-hee! Giggle!

He got me! I hung my head and shook it from side to side, really playing up the part! As B b  ran away in fits of giggles, I shrugged my shoulders and returned to my seat. But was I mad? NO! I was ecstatic! I was soaked, yes, but I was poppa! WOOHOO!

Rich was beside me with a huge grin on his face and big pat on the back. He was so happy for me! For my part, I was so dazed and confused at the interaction, I was beside myself. I could hardly watch the show! And every time B b  came out, all eyes were on him... and me!

Later, just as the Bungee act came to a close, B b  rocketed out from behind the curtain in his over-sized baby buggy - a golf cart retrofitted to contain his enormous size. At this point in the show B b  comes to collect his "poppa" for a few minutes; this is what I was

waiting for. Unlike Rich, who popped out of his seat the moment B     came to get him, I sat and watched, playing up the uncertainty factor. But only for a moment. I could hardly contain myself when B     called for me, so I ended up rushing up the stairs - two at a time no less - to meet him. And just as I took a seat, we took off and flew backstage.

WOOOSH!

Behind the scenes at *Myst  re* was not nearly as hectic as I had expected. All around me stood artists in costume waiting for their next queue or act. Most of them sat silently and off to the side, throwing up a hand or nodding as I looked over at them. A nice lady came over as soon as we arrived and helped get me dressed -- all I had to do was stand on two yellow feet painted on the floor. In a flash I was transformed from spectator to a huge baby, complete with diapers, a bonnet, and a pacifier. She explained what I was about to do, although I already knew, and in the next moment I was back on the cart, ready for my close-up.

"You know what to do with that?" She asked, handing me the baby bottle.

"Oh yeah!" and I immediately put it in my mouth. Goo-Goo! She laughed and we took off!

ZOOOOM! And just like that I was on stage during the middle of the show - oh my god!

The crowd roared with laughter the moment they spotted me and I smiled back, baby bottle in mouth. We rolled up toward the front of the stage and I spotted Rich. I waived, looked out over the crowd and smiled. God, I couldn't believe it. And then we took off and exited stage left. I was met on the other side of the stage with more awaiting artists and another crewmember, ready to help for my quick changeover. She explained the next scene:

since the cart "crashed" when we left the stage, it was my job to "push" it back across. This was a farce, she told me, and that Francois would be controlling the cart at all times.

"No problem!" I said, knowing full well. "Let's do it!"



B     Francois and I appeared on stage again moments later - he at the wheel and I behind, pushing as "hard as I could." I wanted to keep the appearance that I was really pushing the cart back across the stage, so even though I could hear the crowd react to my re-appearance and subsequent condition, I looked up only to appear exasperated at these turn of events. Within moments, though, we disappeared - the Korean Plank/Trampo artists got on with their performance - and my turn as PAPP   had come to an end.

"Yatta!!" I exclaimed, reaching the other side. "That was awesome!"

I was quickly undressed and escorted back to the theater.

And Mystère played on.

Six thousand ninety one other patrons have had the opportunity to play Poppa through the years, but the six thousand nine hundred and ninety second (6992) was mine.

And it will be something I will always remember.

I am now a member of the exclusive POPPA CLUB!

Live to Cirque



NOVEMBER 2008

« ZED: A Timeless Evocation »

CirqueCon 2008: Tokyo!

*Something in the air
Calls again to those who hear
Whispers to the heart*

*A new creation
Born and grown in island soil
Digging deep roots there*

*Evoking such joy
Anticipating wonder
Hearts flutter swiftly*

*YOKOSO!
Welcome!*



Thursday, November 6, 2008 – Sunday, November 9, 2008
Hilton Tokyo Bay | Tokyo Disneyland, Tokyo (JPN)

For the fifth time we gathered, our first time off the North American continent. It was an extraordinary experience planning an Event in a country so far away from our home base; we continue to be amazed by the kindness of our friends at Cirque du Soleil who once again went above and beyond our expectations. This beautiful country holds the promise of many surprises, both big and small.

As CirqueCon - the Unofficial Gatherings of Cirque du Soleil Passionates - reached this quintessential event, we've found we have somewhat of a "core" of Cirque Passionates that will gladly follow us wherever we might choose to go. That core has changed from our first event in 2004, but in the intervening time many friendships have been made, as Passionates have bonded with others of like mind.

We had an extraordinarily strong showing for such a distant location this year: 43 on-site members, 11 hotel rooms at the Hilton Tokyo Bay coming to 45 room nights total. Our members come from one-fifth of the United States, Japan (of course!), Mexico, Canada, Australia, Germany and even Russia. WOW!

/// THE MEETING OF TWO WORLDS

"Hey, I saw you guys running around before the start of the show... what happened?"

With only a few moments to spare before the curtain would again rise on ZED, Cirque du Soleil's then newest resident production in Tokyo, Japan, my friend (and fellow Cirque du Soleil fan) Rich Alford and I entered the theater complex on the afternoon of November 8, 2008 in triumph, though huffing and puffing from the rather long and extensive walk we took from inside this beautiful gem in Disney's resort crown, located at 1-1 Maihama, Urayasushi, Chiba-ken - DisneySEA.



Tokyo DisneySEA

(東京ディズニーシー), which is a take on DisneyLAND, opened next to Tokyo Disneyland Park on September 4, 2001 at a cost of ¥338 Billion, and is divided into seven "ports of call", or themed lands, containing a number of unique as well as time-honored Disney attractions:

Mediterranean Harbor (offering the old-world charm of a romantic southern European seaport as its backdrop), *Mysterious Island*

(a very foreboding, rocky and devoid place set within a South Pacific volcanic caldera of the 1860s - "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" and "Journey to the Center of the Earth" attractions are here), *Mermaid Lagoon* (a whimsical "under the sea" world of fun and play with Ariel, the little mermaid), *Arabian Coast* (harking back 10 centuries to the mysterious enchantment of Arabian Nights - "Sinbad's Seven Voyages", "Caravan Carousel" and "Aladdin" are here), *Lost River Delta* (the foreboding jungles of Central America in the 1930s on the shores of El Rio Perdido, the 'Lost River' - "Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull" and "Mystic Rhythms" attractions are here), *Port Discovery* (the marina of the future as inspired by the futuristic writings of Jules Verne as seen from the 1800s - "StormRider" and "Aquatopia" can be found here), and *American Waterfront* (which recreates two distinct American harbors at the dawn of the 20th Century - New York and Cape Cod; "The Tower of Terror" can be found here.)

Styles, themes, attitude, atmosphere and ambiance of each land are all richly invoked and distinctly themed to the likes I've never before seen in a Disney Park. You'll literally lose yourself within it - I know I have - and enjoyed every moment doing so, as if I were a kid in a candy store! I could wax poetic about this park, and have on multiple occasions in the past, but there just isn't time for that here. Getting back on point, we found ourselves at Tokyo DisneySEA, that morning as hosts to a CirqueCon lunch for a table of eight patrons at Magellan's, a fantastic exploration themed restaurant under the golden globe of Fortress Explorations, the citadel anchoring Mediterranean Harbor on the foothills of Mount Prometheus, the park's signature volcanic icon.

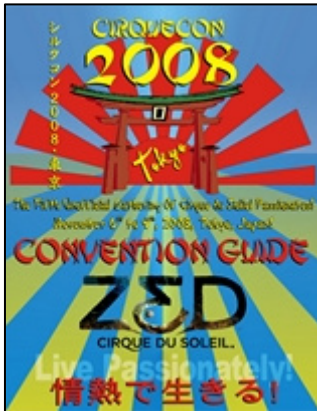


The atmosphere of the restaurant recalls the glory days of oceanic explorers, with a deeply detailed décor that screams refinement, but the food is distinctly western. CirqueCon held three tables for lunch for the maximum accompaniment (eight), at three different times: 11:00am, 12:00pm and 1:00pm. Rich and I hosted a table of 8 at 11:00am, Keith hosted at Noon and Lucy at 1:00pm. Heather & Jim and the Duval party made up our eight;

it was a great time to socialize. Rich and I chose the early table so we would be free to attend ZED's early show, and once the hour struck Noon, we were on our way to the Cirque du Soleil Theater as soon as we could say our goodbyes (likely we'd not see many of these people again on this trip) and make our way over.



But I'm getting ahead of myself.



CirqueCon - the Unofficial Gatherings of Cirque du Soleil Passionates - is a fan-organized assembly of like-minded individuals who share a singular passion: that of the Québécois circus arts. Our humble story began with fans proposing a small gathering in 2004 during the Vancouver run of Quidam, a show, which had just delighted audiences throughout the Japan the year prior. Add a little ingenuity and hard work by the fans, and a touch of folly from Cirque du Soleil and viola - CirqueCon came to be. While the tale of our genesis is somewhat more complicated than just a "coming together", since our inaugural event we've made similar journeys across the continent seeking out our favorite avant-garde circus whenever

possible. It's a drive which has taken us to a number of cities across two continents: Vancouver (2004), Montreal (2005), Las Vegas (2006), Orlando (2007), Tokyo (2008), Monterrey (2009), New York City & Montreal (2010) and Hollywood (2011).

When the announcement that Cirque du Soleil was creating a new resident show specifically crafted for and performed exclusively to audiences in Japan fell upon the council chambers at CirqueCon (of which I am a founding member), we knew exactly where our group was headed in 2008: Tokyo!



Thus ZED, the name of this new creation, became the impetus for yet another return to the Land of the Rising Sun.



Although the lunch at Magellan's was not the last official CirqueCon outing of the weekend - most of the important activities having occurred the day before - it was also not the last. The day before we held a Meet & Greet at our Headquarters Hotel (the Tokyo Disneyland Hilton) from 10:00a - 11:30a, allowing Passionates to mingle with one another; followed by a Training Session/Q&A at the Cirque

Theater from 2:30p - 3:30p, Inside we watched a rehearsal with members from the artistic staff to explain what was going on (which wasn't necessary - we know a flying trapeze when we see it!), but we did appreciate the time spent with us answering our questions and pandering to our curiosity about all things Cirque; then a Group meal at the Ikispari Rainforest Café from 4:00p - 6:00p, set by ourselves in the "Cave" room; ZED from 7:00p - 9:45p, a show that completely exceeded my expectations; and lastly, a Group Photo with some of the cast and crew atop the stage just after the show bows.



Good stuff!

Despite our hurried nature, as both Rich and I looked very much forward to our second performance of the show (we, of course, attended the official CirqueCon performance the previous evening), we paused in the sprawling lobby only to compose ourselves before entering through the portal gates and into the theater proper.



After gaining control of our heaving chests, we entered the theater, spotting a number of our friends from various corners of the North American continent - Wayne Leung from Ottawa, Canada; Rodolfo Elizondo from Monterrey, Mexico; Heather Smith & Jim Strain from New York City, USA and many, more. But what we never expected was to spot someone sitting comfortably in our seats. With a quick glance at our tickets, our worst fears were realized...

"Oh man, these are not our tickets!"

The billets issued to Rich upon arrival were not only not from the show we had requested - today's 2:00pm performance - rather, they were for the later 6:00pm time-slot, a time we couldn't see the show! They weren't even in Rich's name!

With only a few short minutes before the start of the show we were at a loss of what to do. Figuring out that we received the wrong person's tickets, we dashed down to guest services to try and straighten things out. Had we been in America, the urgency wouldn't be quite as pressing, but here in Japan, where everything is virtually lost in translation, what should have been a simple check at the box office turned into a very stressful fiasco for all parties involved.

Unfortunately the theater folks did not understand our sense of urgency - the show would be starting any minute and someone was in our seats! - nor did they seem to comprehend we paid for tickets to that particular showing.

"It's all sold out," we were advised, over and over.

We knew that, of course. That's why we bought tickets in advance. With about a minute before curtain call and with the box office on the phone to Kyoko Hasegawa (our friendly contact at Cirque Tokyo), we dashed back into the theater advising them we were going to take a set of secondary seats they offered us while it all got straightened out. We weren't about to miss the opening of the show!

And we didn't... they found us another set of alternative seats, which we took quickly, settling down to gaze over the white canvas that keeps the world of ZED tightly wrapped.

/// FROM A TO ZED – A TECHNICAL JOURNEY



The journey from A to ZED began with an announcement on April 7, 2005 that Cirque du Soleil came to an agreement with the Walt Disney Company and Oriental Land Co., Ltd (the company that administers Tokyo Disneyland Resort) to open a permanent theater in Tokyo. Ground was broken on the \$140 million USD, 2,000 seat project on April 18, 2006 and blessed by a Shinto priest from nearby Seiryu shrine. By October 1, 2007, construction was far enough along to announce the show would

officially open on October 1, 2008, during the Resort's 25th Anniversary celebrations.

"ZED" became the show's official name on June 3, 2008 (though it had been leaked to the fandom some time before the official announcement). ZED would go on to premiere on time to rave reviews and spectacular attendance. Since its premiere (and over 1,000 performances), ZED has proven to be very popular and reached the one-millionth guest milestone faster than any other show in Japan.

However, the effects of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami event, which took place on March 11, 2011, greatly changed the business environment for the theater (and all of Japan). Based on a review of the expected results and the long-term viability of the show, it was mutually agreed on July 25, 2011 to indefinitely close the Cirque du Soleil Theater Tokyo and cease performances of ZED as of December 31, 2011. The show, which premiered on October 1, 2008, marks Cirque du Soleil's twenty-second production overall, the first permanent theater and show in Japan and its first permanent venture outside of North America.



The story of ZED blossoms in an environment that recalls antique astronomical and navigational instruments set in an ancient cosmos that is at the same time new and somehow familiar. In fact the set takes its inspiration from many eras and influences: ancient science, the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci, the products of the early days of the Mechanical Age, nautical instruments and astronomy all play a part in creating an atmosphere of solidity and tradition, floating in space that looks toward the future. As an example, on the floor of the stage is a representation of the Milky Way, with symbols referring to the different phases of the moon, and star placements.

An alphabet of 26 symbols, known as the Zed Alphabet, appears throughout the set and spells out the periodic table of the elements as well as other words related to the production. And five spheres of various diameters, each displaying their own special effects, form a miniature representation of an Astrolabe – a micro world that reflects the macro



world. Made mostly of steel, the suspended astrolabe weighs 19,504 kilograms (43,000 pounds) and is fitted with a net that can deploy and retract as needed.

The theater is quite unique as it is the first permanent Cirque du Soleil Theater outside of North America (they're either located in Las Vegas or Orlando). It

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opened after about two years of construction and a total business cost of 14 billion yen. The distinctive Theatre roof formed with polyhedrons is designed in the image of a circus tent, the very beginnings of *Cirque du Soleil*. It is specifically designed to harness the sun's rays from any direction and its glass exterior definitely presents an appearance befitting *Cirque du Soleil*, the Circus of the Sun. By the numbers: the building stands about 35 meters high, has approximately 5,400 square-meters of building area and 14,000 square-meters of total floor space to get lost on.

Inside is equally impressive.





Cirque du Soleil Tokyo's stage is one of the largest in Japan with a width of about 35 meters, a depth of about 20 meters, and a height to the ceiling of about 21 meters. The open, semi-circular stage thrusts out into the audience allowing guests to feel even closer to the action. A grid above the audience covers about 1,700 square meters of the ceiling and can support a load of 750 kilograms per square meters. This grid is used for special mechanical equipment and devices that make possible various stage effects.



Such as the "basket" winch from Fisher Technical, a custom ten horsepower counterweight assist winch that provides the means for rigidly securing a four ton piece of scenic and acrobatic equipment through an enormous range of loading conditions; the "net" winches, used to deploy and tension the safety net system for the trapeze (It is a two stage machine, with the first stage rotating a large drum to pull the stage width net into its initial slack position.

After engaging a huge ratchet

backstop on the first stage, the second stage drives a large ball screw to pull the entire winch system backward (riding on heavy duty FTSI FastTrack) to put over 7 tons of tension on the net); and the "vortex" winches that breathe life into the breathtaking opening curtain effect (done using 25 hp motors coupled with huge drums that are over eight feet in length and four feet in diameter. At over 25 linear feet per second, the drums collect almost an acre of fabric in the blink of an eye!). Underneath the stage is one of the world's largest trap rooms with a depth of six meters. All these elements make it possible to present a show that can only be staged at a permanent theater.

The theater's 2,170 seats are arranged around the semi-circular stage with the seats at the back of the theater about 30 meters away, giving the audience a sense of being close to the action. The seats at the front of the theater are designed to allow a good view of Cirque du Soleil's spectacular aerial acrobatics and other effects by having seat backs that recline and extra space between rows. All the seats have cup holders so that guests can enjoy refreshments while they watch the show. These elements all help provide a comfortable and enjoyable ambience in the theater.



To ensure that the highest quality performance can always be presented, the backstage area includes dressing rooms that can accommodate a total of 70 performers, a training room for physical care and treatment, and a rehearsal room with a 10-meter-high ceiling where acrobats can rehearse. Also backstage are acrobatic and other equipment, a metal workshop for maintaining special equipment, and a costume shop where costumes are maintained.



/// A LIVING POEM...

ZED is a timeless evocation that draws together an imaginary world based on the Tarot and its arcana. It is a world that conjures the vitality of the human condition and holds up a mirror to our true selves.



As a living poem, ZED is the meeting of two worlds: the heavens - where iridescent colors, paler shades and pearl and silver predominate - and the earth, which emphasizes ochre, green, turquoise, gold and Venetian blue explode before us. At the center of it all is a wide-eyed, white-clothed harlequin named Zed (played with energy and innocence by Reda Guernick), who represents all of humanity

in all its guises: from wisdom to folly and from discovery to adventure. Zed grows as he discovers the world on his journey of initiation, bridging the gap between the People of the Sky and the People of the Earth.

This world of the arcana, in which ZED finds its inspiration, teems with life and vibrant characters, including the Great Goddess, The Magician, The Sphinxes and the Satyrs - all engaged in a lyrical odyssey to the heart of the human experience. And through eleven different performances, featuring an eclectic cast of mixed progeny one expects from Cirque du Soleil, these characters weave an incredible story of the human condition - from birth, to discovery, to the realization of purpose - sharing and growing. There's...

NOUIT - the Great Goddess /// The creator of the firmament, Nouit (Johanna Lillvik, singer) is the incarnation of the Great Goddess, Mother of the Sky and of all beings who inhabit it. As a representation of the starry sky (she is fitted with wings, decorated with 400 LEDs), Nouit expresses an infinite compassion for all beings and is an ally of Zed, whom she understands and quietly watches over, making every effort to help him achieve his quest.



ABRAKA - King of the Earth /// Inspired by "The Magician" of the Tarot, the magus Abraka (Kevin Faraci) is the Father of the Earth and procreator of all the creatures who inhabit it. Abraka is all-powerful - he wears a chain mail coat and a large royal collar. When he raises his arms, his four wings, which range gradually from purple to gold, spread out over 18 meters - but his power is earthbound and subject to the omnipotence of the Shaman. He is the guardian of the liberating, jubilant power of Zed.



THE SHAMAN & DJINN - Masters of the Arcana ///

Inspired by "The Pope" of the Tarot, the Shaman is clad in a transparent copper-colored outfit coupled with white-painted tribal patterns that contrast with his black skin. As the carrier of the magic incantation of the universe, he presides over the birth of Nouit and Abraka, who submit to him. It is also he who awakens the elements. In him, Zed finds a guide to initiate him into the secrets of the arcane and accompany him on his path to self realization. The Shaman is accompanied by Djinn, his accomplice and apprentice. Covered in gold leaf and smartly adorned, Djinn is the bringer of light and fire, opening the way wherever the Shaman may go.



KERNOUN - the God of Hell /// Kernoun, inspired by "The Devil" in the Tarot, embodies the troubled forces of the unconscious. Covered in the burning hues of reds, oranges, yellows and ochres, he reigns over the subterranean depths, a kingdom that is one of fire where the Satyrs are his unwitting subjects.



CLOWNS - Playing the Fool /// Oulaï and Nalaï; one is a vindictive petty dictator who seeks to control everything, while the other is just plain lazy and always finds a way to do as little as possible. Together, they form an inseparable duo of buffoons with the splendid naivety and great poetry to both move us and make us laugh.

And, of course, ZED himself...

ZED - the Traveler /// Inspired by "The Fool" of the Tarot, Zed resembles a Pierrot. Wearing a Rasta wig and dressed in all white, his paleness allows him to take on the coloring of the various tableaux in which he appears, and reflects his eagerness to know everything. Called to undergo a transformation, he is both multiple and omnipresent. The initial state of Zed is associated with the unconscious and chaos: his imbecility is obvious, but his silliness is touching because it reveals his vulnerability and naivety. By the end of the journey, Zed represents consciousness, restored harmony and the reversal of the order of things through laughter.



He takes us through eleven different performances (Batons, Bungees, Lassos, Poles & Trampoline, Solo Tissue, High Wire, Juggling, Banquine, Straps, Hand-to-Hand and Flying Trapeze), featuring the eclectic cast of mixed progeny one expects from Cirque du Soleil. But he doesn't merely walk us through the individual numbers; he helps thread the tapestry that binds them to each other, and us all, completing stunning images framed in breathtaking tableaux from which an entire world is sewn.



BATONS - Meeting of the Two Worlds /// ZED is the meeting of two worlds: the heavens - where iridescent colors, paler shades and pearl and silver predominate - and the earth, which emphasizes ochre, green, turquoise, gold and Venetian blue explode before us. And Djinn, the baton master, marshals this big bang by combining dance and gymnastics, and demonstrating great agility and exceptional control as he spins three batons around his neck, arms and legs. In the darkness, light or fire, he tosses and spins the batons high into the air and catches them just as easily.

BUNGEE - Birth of the Sky /// As the energy from the meeting of the two worlds begins to dissipate, Nouit descends from the heavens to spread her wings, beautifully framing four artists suspended from bungees who fall precipitously from the heights above the audience to dance a wonderful ballet of happiness, as their movements leave trails of light in their wake.

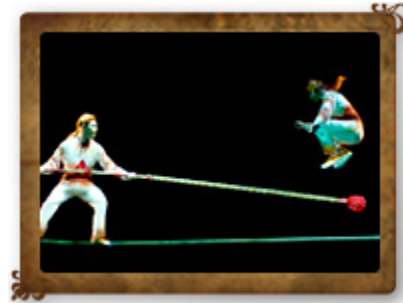
LASSOS - Birth on Earth /// Just as the heavens exuberate in their new-found creation, the earth also comes into its own. Here six guardians of Abraka, master of the Earth, operate lassos with incredible dexterity, their undulating waves helping to harness and amplify the energy of this pristine land to further its existence along all creation.

POLES AND TRAMPOLINE - Reaching Up /// Combining Chinese Poles with the Trampoline, the earth-bound stop at nothing to reach the heavens above where The People of the Sky reside. Using the trampoline as a springboard, the artists bounce high in the air, precisely criss-crossing each other on their way to grab the poles.

SOLO TISSUE - First Sight /// In a stunning display of agility and strength, the graceful performer becomes one with the column of blue fabric that supports and cradles her female form. This breathtaking aerial dance combines elements of acrobatics, contortion and movement to create a stirring and powerful image... one that catches Zed's attention.



WIRE - Pendulum /// A wire is suspended 8 meters over the floor. Above it, a mesmerizing burning pendulum swings back and forth, back and forth. Through balance and precision the tightrope walkers pass each other at a frenetic pace and perform death-defying leaps and breathtaking columns all while trying to keep from plummeting to their doom.



JUGGLING - Kernoun's Fire /// Ascending from Kernoun's lair, a father, mother and their children juggle bowling pins and plates at a dizzying speed, on the floor, in columns of two and three. Then the family transforms juggling into an unforgettable moment of drama using flaming torches that illuminate the stage with a huge dome of fire.



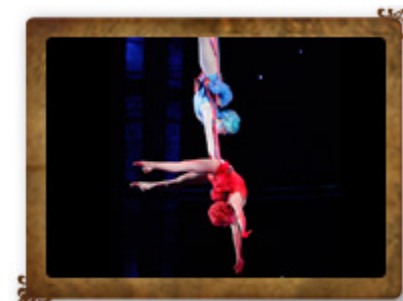
BANQUINE - Babel /// Highlighting the extraordinary agility of the human body, the house troupe mystifies by performing acrobatics and human pyramids in a series of dramatic movements and perfectly synchronized crossings that depend on absolute trust. Sure to astound, Banquine is one of Cirque du Soleil's signature pieces of performance art.



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STRAPS - Zed in Love /// Two artists use straps to bring the game of seduction to life with Zed in this amazing routine. Their movements show incredible agility, balance and great strength as they soar into the heavens hand-in-hand. One represents the People of the Air, the other the People of the Earth; separate they are longing, but together they bring about the concept of love.



HAND TO HAND - Two Worlds Meet /// With strength and flexibility, two artists in constant contact move almost imperceptibly to take positions that demonstrate an infallible sense of balance. In their quest for harmony, the performers rely on their intuition and concentration to present a moment of pure serenity.

FLYING TRAPEZE - Celebration /// A combined group of trapeze performers from two different family troupes came together to present a spectacularly energetic aerial ballet. (It's very fast-paced!) Perched on two parallel platforms, they soar in acrobatic flight to reach the hands of their catchers on the trapeze over and over and over again. The speeds at which they fly across the skies of Zed are astounding!



CHARIVARI - A Fond Farewell

The whole troupe gathers to present an acrobatic parade of strength and elegance with a series of impressive numbers that combine gymnastics and aerial acrobatics. Among the highlights in the number: human pyramids, flying and daring dives achieved through individual strength.



/// ZED'S TABLEAU

As we've seen thus far, ZED's tableau is replete with amazing and stark images, an area that many claim Cirque du Soleil has been lacking in a number of its newest productions. Though I can't claim to enjoy every act, nuance and moment in the show unconditionally, a number of images within ZED both greatly surprised and impressed me. One such image is the dramatic opening of the show, a gasp-inducing moment guaranteed to send chills down even the most rigid unfeeling spine.

Void, null and invalid are words that help define for us the concept of nothing, the very state of the world as we first come upon ZED in Cirque du Soleil's beautiful theater in Tokyo. But the notion of nothingness is merely a misnomer, as much of this world is merely hidden from us behind the behemoth of white canvass known as "the Vortex", a scrim, which comprises more than 5,600 square materials of material.



The Vortex evokes images of what the world might have looked like before the heavens met the earth. For a moment it is a peaceful existence, interrupted only by the cries and laughter of Zed, our guide. But when Zed falls from the heavens into the fertile plains of the earth below - the impetus of the big bang, the Vortex is whisked away at more than six meters per second, making the entire surface vanish in 25 seconds flat. The spectacular birth is one of the most jaw-dropping reveals in a Cirque du Soleil show since the "O" curtain.

Another comes as the energies from the creation of the universe begin to dissipate. Nouit (Johanna Lillvik, singer) - the incarnation of the Great Goddess, descends from the heavens to spread her silvery wings.

It's a striking image, beautifully framing four artists suspended from bungees who fall precipitously from the heights above the audience to dance a wonderful ballet of happiness.

A third comes during the Lassos number. Although this number is lifted from the traditional Chinese circus (and performed roughly the same there as here at Cirque du Soleil), it's the staging and what's going on around the act that commands the most attention. Towering above all, his massive wings outstretched and undulating under the power of his fierce voice, is Abraka, providing the song of earth's creation. As he crescendos and holds that final powerful note, his wings (long, colorful capes that radiate in every direction from his core), break away and fly off into deep space, crafting not only a commanding conclusion to an act, but a powerful transformation for the character.

Another comes during the juggling act; Kernoun ascends from the depths of the stage as the entire area is awash in yellow flame. But one of the most spine tingling has to be at the conclusion of the Hand-to-Hand act, performed by Quidam alumni Yves Decoste and Marie-Laur Mesnage. As the act progresses, dozens of performers on wires descend from all points of the theater and converge together on stage. After the entire cast gathers, they perform as a chorus the last verse of the act's song "The World's Meet". It was such a beautiful moment that I couldn't help but shiver in goose-bumps.

* * *

Immediately following the show we met our friends out in the lobby, regaled them with our tale of ticket woes, and discussed the show. Though stress inducing, I was at least able to calm down after the show's fantastic reveal; however, Rich advised me he could not - still mad over the mix-up that simply shouldn't have happened. In either case our second viewing of ZED was just as good as the first - if not better. Cirque truly has a hit on its hands. As for the rest of the day - back to DisneySEA of course!



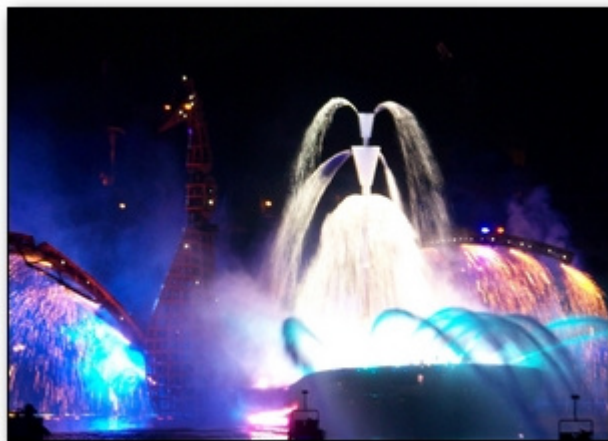
Much like yesterday it was very cloudy in the morning, but unlike yesterday, rather than clearing off and giving way to clear skies and sun, it rained instead. Even with that bit of damp-age, our time in the park was okay nevertheless. After running into Heather & Jim early on (prior to the Magellan's lunch) we stuck with them (or they us) for the remainder of the day. We even ran into Keith & Lucy for a bit - in line at 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.



Due to the nature of the day's schedule, and the rain, we had just enough time to experience a limited number of attractions in the park, but, the good side is that we either did new attractions I hadn't yet experienced or old favorites, like: Journey to the Center of the Earth, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, and Aladdin's Show.

Unfortunately Mystic Rhythms was closed for the period and Raging Spirits, the one other attraction at DisneySEA I've never ridden, had a huge line. So I have something to look forward to do next visit!

Naturally I was all about BraviSEAmo come evening and after its rousing performance, we called it a day. But man what a day. And what a CirqueCon experience!





NOVEMBER 2008

« The Land of Morning Calm »

Cirque in Seoul, South Korea

Interestingly enough, heading to Japan for *CirqueCon 2008: Tokyo!* was just the first half of an amazing Asian itinerary. As a co-organizer of CirqueCon, I knew as far back as our 2006 event that Tokyo would be the destination of choice for the 2008 event, since we also knew of Cirque du Soleil's premiere of ZED that year. Then I had only planned on continuing my journey's throughout Japan (having spent two weeks there in 2004 and 2007); what would be so intriguing as to take me to Seoul on this visit? Cirque du Soleil's 1994 touring production - Alegría - had set up its white Grand Chapiteau in the shadows of South Korea's Olympic Village, and with its close proximity to Tokyo, it was a hard proposition to pass up. So I didn't!

After a wonderful, if not tiring, expedition in Japan that took my friend Rich Alford and I both from Tokyo to Kyoto, Osaka, Koyasan, Uji, Nagoya, Inuyama, Matsumoto, and Nagoya and back, we left Tokyo bound for Seoul on the 9:20am Korean Air flight, touching down in Seoul-Incheon around Noon the afternoon of Sunday, November 16th. Here we only had 24 hours before we continued on to the United States, but in that time our plan was simple: check into our accommodations, hit the town to see a few sights if we could, see Alegría under the Grand Chapiteau, then get to sleep - we'd depart Seoul very early the following morning.

We had quite the interesting day in the "land of morning calm"...

/// A LITTLE SEOUL...

Seoul, with a population boasting well over 10 million people, is the capital and largest city of South Korea. It is also one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world, currently ranked 11th on that list, behind such worldly destination as Shanghai, Karachi, Istanbul, Delhi, Mumbai, Beijing, Moscow, Sao Paulo, Tianjin, and Guangzhou. Tokyo is 14th, Mexico City 15th, New York City 18th, London 20th and Hong Kong 25th for comparison. In fact, the Seoul National Capital Area - the administrative region that contains the districts of Seoul, Incheon, and a large part of an area referred to as Gyeonggi-do - is the world's second-largest metropolitan area with over 29.5 million inhabitants. Tokyo ranks first in this category with Mexico City, New York City and Mumbai third, fourth and fifth respectively. So it should really come as no surprise to learn that almost half of South Korea's population lives within this 605.25 sq km (233.7 sq mi) area. And we're smack-dab in the middle of it.

Though probably one of the most advanced technological societies on the planet (even rivaling the Japanese in modernization and technological prowess; Samsung and LG are based here), Seoul has not abandoned its roots, historically speaking. There has been a major settlement here for over 2,000 years; the city's foundation dates back to 18 BC with the establishment of the Baekje capital (one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea) here in what is now southeast Seoul. As such you'll find grand palaces, magnificent gates, and a number of ruins to explore from one end of the city to the other, without getting bored. Discovering Seoul is a wonderful reflection on the peninsula's history. I know very little of Korean history; however, the Three Kingdoms of Korea in this instance refer to the ancient native kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla, which dominated the peninsula and parts of Manchuria for much of the 1st millennium. But like most national histories - be it Asian or European - much of the political landscape changed over time. Reigning from 57 AD until Silla's triumph over Goguryeo in 668 AD, the Three Kingdom's period gave way to the North and South States period of unified Silla in the South and Balhae in the North. This division, however, did not give rise to the current North and South Korea. After the North and South States Period (668 AD - 926 AD) there was the Dynastic Period (918-1897), the Korean Empire (1897-1910) and subsequent Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and lastly a Provisional government period that following World War II gave way to the division of Korea we know today.

And it's this division - Communist North versus the Democratic South - that I am most familiar. Probably due in large part to the continuing incidents between them, but mostly thanks to American TV show M*A*S*H. Adventurous travelers can visit the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) should they be well inclined; however, Rich and I decided to stick closer to the city - in fact we never left it once we arrived.

Tired and frightened but excited, Rich and I departed Tokyo bound for Seoul on Korean Air flight #706 arriving at Incheon International Airport straight-up twelve o'clock noon, just as promised. As this was our first visit to Seoul and all of South Korea, a number of questions, uncertainties, and feelings rose to the surface as we deplaned, giving us a belly full of butterflies: how would we be treated as tourists, as Americans, how would customs work, and could we navigate this behemoth of a city?



Strangely enough, these were all the same kinds of questions I used to have about Tokyo and Japan when I first came to visit in 2004. Having visited twice more since then (including this trip), I've come to look at Japan as a second home, and therefore feel little to no trepidation coming into Narita, using the N'EX to get to Tokyo-eki and navigating around the country at large by myself. What an interesting feeling then to have felt little confidence about entering South Korea, North Korea just a mere 60 miles away be damned.

But equally strangely, all trepidations were laid to rest the moment we stepped from the plane and into the surprisingly modern (and clean!) world that is Incheon International Airport - it was like walking into EPCOT itself!

Incheon International Airport

(인천국제공항), located 70 kilometers (43 miles) west of Seoul, is the largest airport in South Korea, the primary airport serving the Seoul national capital area, and one of the largest and busiest airports in the world - Asia's eighth busiest airport in terms of passengers, the world's second busiest airport in terms of international cargo and freight, and the world's ninth busiest airport in terms of international passengers if you're interested. Besides serving as an airline hub, the airport has a golf course, spa, private sleeping rooms, an ice-skating rink, a casino, an indoor gardens and a museum of Korean culture. But the inner-child in me sprang loose at the futuristic and totally modern décor - with some of the machinations not even yet working! Any and all previous conceptions of what South Korea would be like flew out the door, replaced with a very modern society and a sense of ease.



Navigating the airport turned out to be a breeze, Customs was quick and painless (we had no trouble getting accepted into the country), but getting into the city at large? Well... Since the airport is located out on a reclaimed spit of land in the middle of a sea, transportation alternatives are not quite prepared. There is a highway network, of course, and a train system in development, but it's not yet finished. Therefore, getting to Seoul and our hostel - Lee & NO - would require getting to know some of the transportation alternatives right off the bat. The first is the A'REX, an express system similar to the N'EX at Narita - it takes passengers from the airport to the center of the city (or will). Here, though, because it is largely unfinished, our journey will begin here for ₩3100 (approximately \$1 = ₩1000) but end at Gimpo Airport about 30 minutes later (a distance of 37.6 kilometers), where we'll catch the Seoul Metro system's Number 5 line (purple) from Gimpo to a location called "Yeongdeungpo-gu", switching there to the Number 2 line (light green) and following it up to a station called "Hongik University" where Lee & No was located. We'd be on foot from there.

It actually proved easy enough.

And since we needed to get local currency to buy the train ticket, it gave me my first glimpse of the Korean Won (₩). "Won" is a cognate of the Chinese yuan and Japanese yen; All three names derive from the Hanja 圓 (원), which means "round shape." The currency comes in both coins and bills: coins in 1, 5, 10, 50, 100 and 500 denominations; and bills in 1000, 5000 and 10000 - and they're quite colorful!



The switch-over to regular subway at Gimpo was also relatively painless - walk from one terminus into the other, pay your dues, and hop on the train; however, riding the Seoul Subway system in the future was going to be a mess - it's a sprawling beast and I was intimidated! And I should be - it is one of the most heavily used rapid transit systems in the world, with well over eight million trips daily on the system's thirteen lines. But I would come to master it.



And similar too, but vastly different from its Japanese counterpart, the network is operated as two types (urban rail and wide-area rail) by six different organizations: Seoul Metro (서울메트로), Seoul Metropolitan Rapid Transit Company (서울특별시도시철도공사) - also known as SMRT (서울도시철도), The Seoul Metro Line 9 Corporation, the Incheon Metro, Korail (코레일), and the A'REX. This vast network serves Seoul, Incheon, Gyeonggi-do, northern Chungcheongnam-do, and western Gangwon-do. Over 70% of the total metro track length is underground and most of the stations within Seoul itself have screen doors installed for safety. All directional signs in the Seoul Subway are written in both Korean and English. Station signs and some maps also display Hanja. The prerecorded voice announcement in the trains indicating the upcoming station, possible line transfer and exiting side are all in Korean followed by English, and in some cases Japanese then Chinese.

Seoul is quite the tourist-friendly city!

/// TO LEE & NO

Administratively, Seoul is divided into 25 districts (구 *gu*), each with an area and population comparable to a small city. The districts are then further subdivided into 522 sub-districts (동 *dong*), but that's getting things a little too complicated for just a twenty-four hour visit. It's easier, however, to divide the city into the following areas (as suggested by Wikipedia):

- **Jongno** (종로) - On the north-side of the Han-gang (river) is the historical core of the city, containing most palaces and government offices. You can also find **Insa-dong**, which is a popular street area to find souvenirs and within walking distance to many of Seoul's historic cultural landmarks, in this district.
- **Gangnam** (강남) - An area south of the river that is more "uptown" and modern. It is Seoul's most popular area for tourists and where the largest hotels can be located.
- **Yeoui-do** (여의도) - As an island in the Han River, it is the closest Seoul gets to Manhattan with skyscrapers. You'll find the National Assembly and the Seoul Stock Exchange here.
- **Hongdae** (홍대) and **Sinchon** (신촌) - Located west of Seoul Station, Hongdae and Sinchon are two of the areas most frequented by hip college students and foreigners. Features hundreds of restaurants, bars, and night clubs. West of Mapo-gu you can find the Seoul World Cup Stadium.
- **Hyehwa** (혜화) - colloquially known as Daehangno (대학로), this is Seoul's performing arts center, with dozens of small theaters with live dramatic and comedic performances lining every street.
- **Yongsan** (용산) - Yongsan is home to the US Army Military Base as well as one of the largest electronics markets in the world. This is also where you'll find **Itaewon** (이태원), perhaps the most culturally diverse area on the entire peninsula and home to dozens of restaurants featuring cuisine from the world over, numerous shops selling everything from custom-tailored suits to antiques, and several Western pubs and bars.



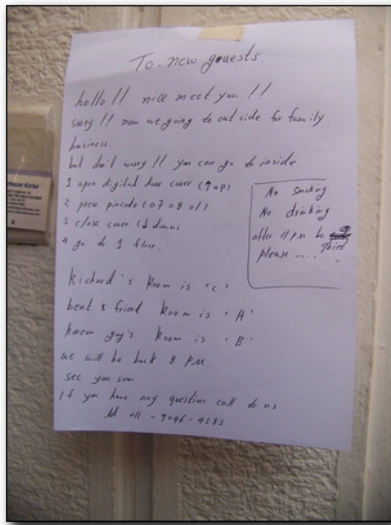
- **Songpa** is where you'll find Lotte World, Olympic Park, and Seoul (Jamsil) Sports Complex [where Cirque du Soleil's Alegria is playing]. Songpa is one of the richest districts in Seoul.
- **Jung** rests to the south of City Hall--but still north of the Han River--and is where you'll find the 262-meter peak of **Namsan** (남산), a structure similar to the shape of Seattle and Shanghai's most popular skyscrapers and the National Theater.



Lee & No, where we elected to stay here in Seoul, is located off the "Hongik University" exit of Line #2 in Mapo-gu, which you can see in the rendering above. Finding the hostel proved to be the second-most interesting part of arriving in Seoul, as once we left the relatively safe confines of the bustling metro station (oh, where was that cleanliness we saw at the airport?- too many people I guess), we entered a strange, new world as soon as we popped our heads above ground. The map in our possession was detailed but somehow inadequate (flashbacks to finding Homeikan and K's House for the first time in Japan ran across my mind), but we took to the streets of the neighborhood anyway. And even if we did get a little lost along the way, we did end up finding Lee & No... though what we found upon arrival was bizarre.



We found a note - "Hello!!! Nice to Meet You!!!" - with a message from our hosts.



They'd gone out for family business and wouldn't be back until later in the evening, but not to worry - we could go right inside. They provided the code to their security gate (uhm, okay?), advised us what rooms we would occupy and then how to reach them if we needed to. It was so off the wall that I had to take a picture of it; who would believe me when I told this story? Since we had other business to attend to, we tried the code (it worked) and settled into our room - a very sparse room with just enough space for two beds with a night-stand and lamp between them. We found the bathroom (but nothing much of a shower), the laundry room, the kitchen and common room area - giving ourselves the tour - then left for Namsan Tower.



/// OUT AND ABOUT

Once we left Lee & No, we would not return until much later tonight - possibly after midnight. Though we hoped we wouldn't disturb our new hosts, and we hadn't yet settled the bill, it couldn't be helped - they weren't there and we had to be out. I wanted to see a number of curiosities within the city's limits with the remaining time we had; however, due to the nature of travel (uh, so where do we go again?) coupled with not really understanding the true nature of distances from point A to B within a new city, we only got to one of them: Namsan Tower.

Namsan Tower, officially known as N Seoul Tower (and even more officially known as the CJ Seoul Tower), is a communication and observation platform located on Namsan Mountain (South Mountain), a wonderful green-space in central Seoul. Built in 1969 at a cost of approximately \$2.5 million, it measures 236.7 meters (777 feet) in height (from the base) and tops out at 479.7 meters (1,574 feet) above sea level. Since it opened to the public in 1980, the tower has become the de-facto international symbol for the city at large, much like the Space Needle for Seattle, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Statue of Liberty in New York City, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, the Kyoto Tower in Kyoto, the Tower Bridge (and Big Ben) in London, and so on, and so forth.

There are a number of ways to reach the tower - from taking the paved roadways that wind up and through the wooded greens, a concrete staircase, to walking on foot via one of the park's numerous marked trails - but whatever the means, there's no easy direct route up... and it's quite a hike. Many visitors, then, choose to ride the Namsan Cable Car up the mountain for a small price, and then walk the rest of the way there. This mode of transportation looked like our best bet, but finding it would prove to be most problematic. The closest you can get to it is Seoul Central Station on Subway line 1 (take exit 10) or line 4 (take exit 2 or 3 to street-level). But where to set off on foot from there was a complete mystery... even with the tower looming in the distance.

We set off on foot in one direction, hoping the cable car station was nearby... then turned round when we didn't come across any signage letting us know we might be going in the right direction. Then we tried the opposite direction, of course, but turned up about as much that way as we had the first - nothing. With the clock ticking and frustration growing, we opted for a taxi ride to the mountain's summit, hoping as we did so that this cab ride wouldn't be a replay of our more recent Tokyo jaunt. Though the ride was rather long (it seemed as if we went round the mountain's base at least once before starting up the two-lane road to the top), we made it to the tower in one piece. The last few hundred steps or so we took on foot, an arduous affair at a 45-degree angle.

The first thing we noticed once catching our breath was the tower terminus of the Namsan Cable Car; walking over, we peered down the side of the mountain and found the city terminus... quite a distance from Seoul Station.

"We wouldn't have made it there even if we knew where it was!"

The base of the tower is awash in activity but it was the confines, and hopefully quietness, of the observation galleries far above us that we looked for. There are four observation decks here (the first and second are the public observatories, the third is a revolving restaurant, rotating at a rate of one revolution every 48 minutes - reservations are needed to see the view from here, and the fourth is actually a roof-top deck, not accessible today), as well as gift shops and two other restaurants. It only takes ₩7000 to experience the observation galleries and they're well worth the price. The experience getting to the top was straightforward - elevator trip up with some information about the tower and Seoul along the way - all of Seoul opens up from here unlike any other observation platform I've seen in Japan, Europe or North America. A spectacular panorama of the jewel of the orient!





Due to the time involved getting to N Seoul Tower, and the time we now thought it would take getting to Alegría at the Sports Complex (since we'd have to get down from the mountain), we didn't have a lot of time to spend at the tower itself; we opted for a taxi ride down and a continuance to the Jamsil Sports Complex (잠실종합운동장). Getting the taxi driver to understand "Sports Complex" for the ride down, though, was a little more complicated. And not only that, the Jamsil Sports Complex was clear across town and we were about to brave the roads in the middle of rush hour traffic. Would we get there in time?

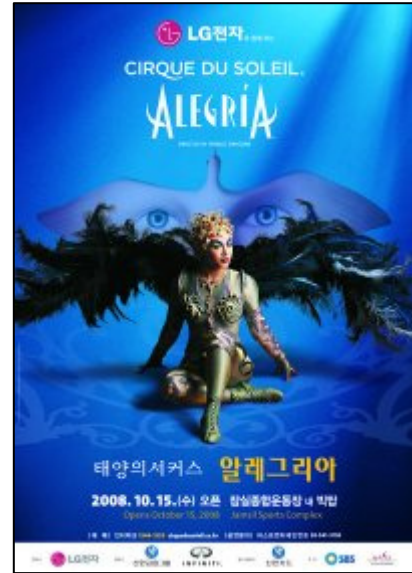


Serviced by Subway Line 2, the complex consists of the Olympic Stadium, Auxiliary Stadium, Jamsil Arena, Jamsil Baseball Stadium, Jamsil Indoor Swimming Pool, Jamsil Inline Skating Rink and the Sports Park. The complex is steeped in history as the successful hosts of the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. Though it's not hosted a major world event since then (and there's not much to see), visiting the grounds of an Olympic park would be thrilling... if we made it in time.



Rounding the corner of the Sports Complex found the white spires of **Cirque du Soleil's Alegría** thrusting ever skyward. The grounds were eerily dark and quiet - patrons had not yet begun to arrive (and little did we know at that point attendance for the show would only be about 25%) but a few of our friends that made the journey with us were standing nearby: Heather Smith & Jim Strain, and Rie Sugawara and her friends from Japan. And we were right on time. Fancy that!

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.



Settling into our seats in section 200, Row I, the group of us watched intently as Little Tamir took to the stage. His warnings about not using flash photography or cell phones during the show were well met, although he did incite a chuckle out of the audience with his attempt to welcome the group in their native Korean tongue (I guess he misspoke), and just as quickly as he shuffled on stage, he was gone, replaced with three clowns, a bright, white light and the wonderful sounds of Alegría.

And from the very start we received few thrills through exposure to the show's back-up and alternate acts.

Solo Trapeze took the place of Duo Trapeze and I must say I prefer Solo to the normal Duo performance; Stephanie Gasparoli twisted about the trapeze bar like I've not seen in ages -- truly a technically strong and visually exciting performance! Trapeze was followed by Fast Track, which was just as poignant as ever, even with a quarter-full big top. Fire Dance followed FastTrack and I was pleased to see that both men (Malli Mafakigi Sumeo and Karl Sanft) came out to give all they could. Hoops/Manipulation was canceled and in its place stood Denys Tolstov's amazing Hand-balancing act. Both elegant and strong, Denys uses his incredible upper body strength to hold figures and poses on canes of various heights (one is at least a meter or more tall!). And you'll be amazed when you see him jump down from one to the next using only his hands. Strong Man was also absent from our performance, replaced by a young artist who normally performs in the Russian Bars number.

It is said he wished to create his own act and thus learned the art of juggling; however, either by nature of the audience or the number of mistakes made, I was not overly impressed. And, of course, the Snowstorm closed out Act One.

Act Two was sadly devoid of Flying Man (neither Aleksandr Dobrynin's famous number or Aerial Cube, which was performed as an act-in-rotation for Alegría 2 in Japan); after Danse Vazoule the show went immediately into Russian Bars, which itself was a very short presentation. I'm not sure what choreography the artists were using but it was neither the latest nor the first (as seen on the DVD). Only a few tricks here and then they were off - I was quite disappointed, as Russian Bars is one of my favorite performances from Alegría! Ulziibuyan Mergen and Oyun-Erdene Senge saved the moment with their slow, fluid movements. Contortionists both; it had been such a long time since I had witnessed this act as a duo, I had forgotten how beautiful an act it was - duality truly in motion. High Bar closed out the show as usual.

Though it was nice to see Alegría again, and experience it in a foreign country, the small turnout combined with the lack of care and energy from the performers, turned out a rather lack-luster and very forgettable performance of the show. I've seen a number of "off-night" shows in my time but this one takes the prize as the worst-ever.

I was disappointed.

* * *

After getting a few good-bye photos with our Japanese friends, Heather, Jim, Rich and I filed out of the Jamsil Sports Complex and had a late dinner at Seoul's Hard Rock Café, allowing Rich the singular experience of visiting the restaurant there. Following dinner we went our separate ways, with Rich and me returning to LEE & NO for the evening.

Spending twenty-four hours in Seoul was not nearly enough time. Our time here was just "okay". I was impressed coming in - everything was very modern and clean - but I'm not as impressed as I get ready to leave. Perhaps it's because the people here seem so grumpy. It could just be my perception of them because the Japanese are so nice and polite, going out of their way to help you. Koreans in contrast, at least the couple we ran across in certain purchasing situations, seemed rather blasé about helping their customers, or even talking to them. But that could be because Rich and I were American rather than Asian. And perhaps they haven't yet let the ills of the Korean North/South Conflict leave them.

Whatever the reason, I will say this: I do like Lychee Fanta!





APRIL 2009

« The Birth of Ovo »

A Teeming World of Insects...



Witnessing the birth of a brand-new Cirque du Soleil touring show is a must-see event that every fan of the Cirque should attempt at least once in their lifetimes. Taking the show in with the hometown crowd is a singular experience not to be missed - the abundance of excitement, that electric spark of energy, and unfettered restlessness over the anticipation of reveal is both fascinating and intoxicating. A pure, raw, energy invades the Grand Chapiteau here unlike anywhere else in the world. And when you share the experience

with friends the experience can be most enlightening.

Going to Montreal to see a premiere is a particular thrill I have been privileged to experience, beginning with Varekai (2002), and continuing with Corteo (2005), Koozå (2007) and now with Ovo (2009). Each time the experience is different, as shows are opened at various stages of development and different stages of presentation. Corteo and Koozå had some minor work ahead of it before reaching its full potential, while Varekai needed a complete act shuffle before coming to its final form. From these examples we find that some concepts are further along than others, but generally all turn out a well-satisfied crowd.

But with Ovo, the spell seems to be broken.

Perhaps this one should have gestated a little longer.

Or perhaps the expectations were set just a wee bit high.



* * *

/// THE BIG APPLE

Prior to hitting the beautiful cobblestone streets of the Vieux Port of Montreal, I spent two days in New York City taking in the sights and sounds of the Big Apple. There's something about New York City that invigorates me, although I don't know why since exploring it saps all my energy! Be that as it may, New York City has a number of Class-A attractions and neighborhoods that simply cannot be ignored. There's Uptown, Downtown, Theater District, Chinatown, Little Italy, the Park, and more. Each one is an amazing cultural province all its own. And each time I visit the big city I learn more about its identity.



For example, I discovered where the term "The Big Apple" originated: It seems that in 1920, John J. Fitzgerald - a local horseracing sports writer - heard a New Orleans stable-hand refer to New York by that name. Shortly thereafter, he recycled the term in his newspaper column whereby other reporters began picking up on it. Gossip columnist Walter Winchell used it to identify New York's entertainment district in 1927 - and by the 1950s, it had become a common way to refer to the city, since New York represented opportunity for many people.



New York presented us an amazing opportunity to have fun over the few days we were in town. We had Dim Sum in China Town, Chocolate Canole's and Cappuccinos in Little Italy, hearty soups in Grand Central Station, and bar-b-que in Times Square. Outside of the theater district we visited two of the city's famed museums: MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) and Metropolitan Museum of Art. MOMA has an eclectic array of modern art in its collection from sculpture, painting, furniture,

architecture and more. Included as part of its gallery are many world-famous paintings, such as: "The Starry Night" by Vincent van Gogh, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" by Pablo Picasso, "The Persistence of Memory" by Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans", and "Water Lilies" by Claude Monet. And while each one of these was a treat to see, it seems Modern Art isn't my thing. Some of it is just too abstract for my tastes.

Down the road at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I found things more to my liking. Unfortunately we didn't have a lot of time to explore this enormous museum; however, we were able to examine the Egyptian, Chinese and Japanese collections, pass through the Greek and Roman statuary, and float through the classical European paintings on the second floor. As such we got to see a print of "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", the first in Hokusai's 36 Views of Mount Fuji (including other fine examples). In the European painting section many fine examples rested, including Van Gogh's "Self Portrait with a Straw Hat" and Jacques-Louis David's "The Death of Socrates".



Outside of the arts we took in two shows: Lion King on Broadway and Cirque du Soleil's Koozå on Randal's Island. While Koozå is always great fun - my sixth overall viewing and I've enjoyed it each and every time (this one no different even though the Juggler was sitting out our performance) - our presentation of the Lion King at Minskoff Theater was even more exhilarating. I've seen Lion King at least four other times: twice on the US National Tour (both the Gazelle and Cheetah companies), once on the West End in London, and again most recently in Tokyo, but never in the location the show first opened: on Broadway. It took a little more than 10 years but the dream finally came true - and with front-row tickets no less! Experiencing the show from the front

row, while a little difficult due to the height of the stage, cannot be equaled anywhere else. From this vantage you become part of each scene, rather than watching it from afar. It is truly an emotional experience to be caught up in Mufasa's death, the mourning Lionesses, and many other facets that make up Simba's life story.

Meeting Nala after the show for a photo opportunity (thanks to a donation to charity) was also a major highlight. It was simply a treat I will never forget.

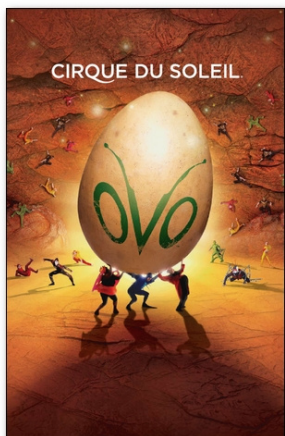
But of course, the reason for the journey was Ovo - Cirque du Soleil's newest touring production.





Love Always
i Always ♡
Jill

/// A TEEMING WORLD



OVO (pronounced oh-voh) takes its name from the Portuguese word for Egg, an animal reproductive body consisting of an ovum together with its nutritive and protective envelope. "When a mysterious egg appears in the insect's midst," the press release suggests, "they are awestruck and intensely curious about this iconic object;" a timeless symbolic representation of birth. The enigma and its importance to the insectoid microcosm embodies the underlying thread of the show, which is also communicated graphically as OVO hides an insect in its name: The two letter "Os" represent the eyes while the letter "V" forms the nose.

"OVO is overflowing with contrasts. The hidden, secret world at our feet is revealed as tender and torrid, noisy and quiet, peaceful and chaotic. And as the sun rises on a bright new day the vibrant cycle of insect life begins anew."

Entering the Grand Chapiteau is always a treat; when you step foot inside the big top for a brand new show expectations run rampant, which only serves to heighten the excitement even more. When the flimsy doors of Ovo's big top parted, my nostrils instantly filled not with the strange but intoxicating, cinnamon-like scent that wafted through the air at Varekai, but rather with a peaty, earthy kind of smell. A hint toward the show's universal theme of biodiversity.

As with most Cirque du Soleil productions (all in recent memory), Ovo begins with a pre-show animation sequence that puts the unsuspecting audience face-to-face with Cirque performers. Here the theme of an insect world is expounded upon by a small assortment of insect characters (namely the grasshoppers) milling about the seating area with an entourage of human scientists dressed in full-protective garb carrying around catcher's nets and magnifying glasses, inspecting the audience, capturing them with their nets and otherwise causing muted chaos.

As the lights dim, our attention is then directed upon the trio of stalks neatly distributed within this microcosmic arena, and to the rather large and inescapable egg-shaped object situated in its center. While we in the audience can only begin to wonder about the impending reveal of the egg and its meaning, a small insect contingent converges upon the stage, ascending the stalks (themselves reminiscent of dandelion stems) to flit about. Once the spectator do's and dont's are understood, the creatures come to life by crying, buzzing, trilling and chirping the show's namesake - OVO.





A rainbow of light washes over the (28ft wide by 22ft tall) egg, bathing it in reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, indigos and violets - swirling about in a Technicolor rainbow, projections reminiscent of *Delirium*. Strobos flash and thunder for fleeting seconds, momentarily blinding, raising the level of tension. But if you're waiting for a dramatic reveal a la *SalTIMBANCO*, "O" or ZED, you'll be sorely disappointed. The world goes pitch black and the egg simply deflates, its collapsed hulk simply drug offstage left.

When the lights arise - the insects swarm. There are nine (9) different performances (acts) by this multi-cultural cast of 53, each a new and exciting peek into this creepy-crawly world that Deborah Colker, a renowned choreographer, has created for us, a headlong-rush into this teeming buggy ecosystem. Theirs is perhaps a right of passage dance, itching and scratching their way across the stage to showcase their world to us, to welcome us and to invite us.



/// OVO: THE SHOW

They part to reveal a lone dragonfly, performed by Vladimir Hrynenko. He floats about the stage and glides along on an intricately conceived set piece that, upon second glance, is a balancing cane twisted in a spiral to elevate him above the stage in a very elaborate manner. (This apparatus is a perfect example of the show's particular style: an organic inspiration whereby there are almost no straight lines to be found). At the top rests a normal balancing block, which he puts to great use in his handbalancing act, but he also uses the curvature of the apparatus to slip, slide and flit about in a very calm, soothing manner.



As the dragonfly slowly flutters off stage, a strange and alluring character begins to traverse the pathways of the Grand Chapiteu, carrying an ovo of immense size securely upon his back. He is the Foreigner, a fly in vintage suit who only reveals his true nature (a lone soul) when he falls for the ladybug.

"OOOOHKAY!" - After coming in contact with the Ladybug, the Crickets steal off with his egg, leaving the Foreigner dazed and confused.

The ants, dressed in red, invade the macrocosm next, bringing with them their foraging spoils - little bites of food (Kiwi, Corn and Mushrooms)! Combining the ancient art of Chinese foot-juggling with the equally old art of Icarian Games, this sextet of Asian-girl cuteness (Han Jing, Kong Yufei, Pei Xin, Su Shan, Wang Shaohua, and Zhu TingTing) takes the stage by storm and do not disappoint. The ants work in tandem, flipping their food about with ease. And just when you think you've seen it all they flip themselves while also flipping their spoils! Easily it's the most exciting aspect of the first half of the show.



A small cocoon ascends as the ants march off the stage, beautifully introducing the next performance. A performer in silk struggles to break free of her cocoon; spreading the silk threads after emergence to evoke the delicate wings of a butterfly. Her metamorphic birth then gives way to two other butterflies who soar into the sky on a strong forest vine. Maxim Kozlov and Inna Mayorova (from Russia) perform a slow, sensual dance of trust and love, wrapping themselves and each other in a single Spanish web rope. After their performance, we meet up with the Foreigner again as he continues his search for his Ovo. But his presence in this world isn't liked by all and gets into a mock sword fight with Flipo, the male matriarch of this little insect community.



Slinky-dude comes forth to lighten the mood next. Performed by Lee Brearley, he is figuratively and literally a human slinky; twisting, twirling, lifting, and flopping about the stage in a multi-colored tubular (caterpillar-esque) costume. Unfortunately his presence on stage, while wonderfully appreciated, is short-lived. And then... the scarabs take to the scene.

Volants is one of the more intriguing original creations from the Cirque; it combines the techniques and talents of flying trapeze, banquine, and Russian swing amongst a hand-full of other disciplines. Here a team of black-and-gold colored scarabs take to the skies and fly about the top of the grand chapiteau. On both ends exists a staging platform and two standard pendulum swings from which the trapeze flyers launch and the catchers catch, but in the middle, however, rests a second platform from which to catch and launch the flyers banquine style. It's quite an amazing set-up that just doesn't quite live up to the build-up. (However, we've heard that an injury during the lion's den - a performance done for Guy Laliberté before the show can go on - resulted in an injury. That injury prevented most of the staging to go on as planned).

Intermission.

When we return to our seats and the house lights dim once again, the stage lights rise without fanfare to begin the second half of the show, almost as if we just pressed play after pausing a video presentation.

Hanging from all points of the insect's stage is a spider's web, spun about to set up the contortion act of a trio of deadly female black widow spiders. A relatively well done, typical contortion set performed by Svetlana Belova from Russia begins, perfectly framed as the ruler of her kingdom. As far as contortion acts go I will contend she was quite nervous in our showing so her performance may not have included more than just a typical set. Two other spiders (performed by Robyn Houpt, USA; and Marjorie Nantel, Canada) joined the fun, crawling about in the web and cavorting on stage to draw other non-suspecting insect-prey into their grasp.

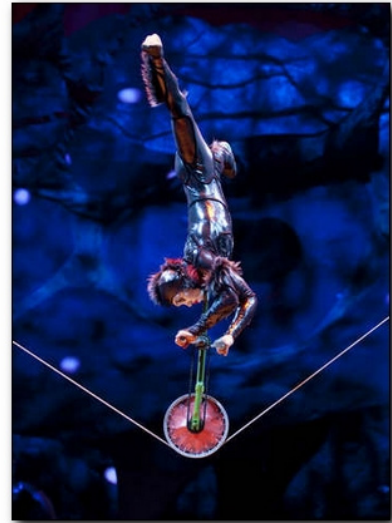


The yellow and white costumed fleas jump on stage next for Acrosport, a cross between the adagio and banquine disciplines performed by Anna Gorbatenko, Natallia Kakhniuk, Khrystsina Maraziuk, Elena Nepytayeva, and Olga Varchuk from the Ukraine and Belarus. These costumed insects leap and bound through an act that, while impressive, sorely lacks any real choreography (and this from a director that specializes in choreography). As such we're shown tricks rather than highly skilled techniques. Cirque du

Soleil has featured banquine in three of its shows to date - Quidam, "O" and ZED - and at present I would have to rate this performance similar to that featured in "O". While this does not mean the presentation is overly ghastly, it does lack a certain element, oomph if you will, that would bring this piece to that next level.

A black spider takes firm control of our world with this phenomenal number - slackwire. First strung loosely close to the stage's floor, then raised 20 feet or more above the stage, Li Wei performs an amazing number of hand-balancing and coordinated techniques on this tensionless wire. One hand, two hand and no-hand (cane) balancing techniques are made without a fuss. He even makes riding a uni-cycle upside down powered only by his hands look easy. It was definitely the most exciting performance of OVO at this showing; quite a crowd pleaser!

The last remaining scrim is then removed from the stage revealing an enormous wall and trampoline. The crickets, which we've seen hopping about at various times during the show, finally get to shine here, bouncing and tumbling about, while other insects take part by using the wall. The ants, for example, can be seen crawling along in a perfect line, just like typical ants. Unfortunately the wall is overused and the power track and trampoline completely underutilized. The entire act is performed with an enormous amount of (obviously) pent-up energy on the grasshopper's parts; however, the techno-pop music and abhorrent staging deflate any excitement generated by this number's reveal. Why go through all the trouble and expense of a trampoline and powertrack (similar to La Nouba's) and not really flip down the track much? It is my sincere hope that since this number closes the show acrobatically its presentation and execution will be greatly tightened soon.



The insects once again swarm the stage in the show's finale, a feast for a job well done. This closing dance number also acts as an act sign-off - characters from each of the performed numbers crawl across the banquet table giving the audience a moment to show their approval in claps and cheers. Unfortunately the presentation of this ending is somewhat confusing, as the traditional pause in music (usually announcing a curtain call) did not come; therefore, the audience was unsure whether this was just a dance or whether it was really the end. It was.



/// IN CONCLUSION

All in all, while I think biodiversity is a grand theme to attempt, and I don't mind the buggy world, I think its concept was taken a little too literally here, which appears quite heavily in the character's costumes. They are ingenious and highly detailed, but appear more laughable in that pulp sci-fi kind of way. You know, cheesy. In other shows - *Mystère* for example - we have birds and lizards whose costumes evoke the sense of that creature, but do not literally cast the performer as that creature. It is my opinion that perhaps something similar should have occurred here - especially with the Ladybug.

What OVO lacks is a concrete choreography and wasted potential in the presentation of its acrobatic acts. The skill set is not showcased; the bar has not been raised from previous efforts. This can be seen time and time again with the Hand-balancing act, the contortion piece, the Acrosport, and the power track/wall performance. More time and effort appears to be spent on the visuals surrounding the performance (a.k.a. its framing) rather than on the physical performance itself. And if there's little new technical merit what then is the point? It's all very nice and colorful, but there's no pop, no oomph, no chutzpah - which is also a problem with the show's score.

There's also a lack of depth, sophistication, and worldly vibe that we expect from Cirque du Soleil music. What we get instead are uses of Beethoven's Fifth and a rather jazzy "La Cucaracha" and a number of choices that act more as a background tune than a supportive note.

The performances on the old quays of Montreal are by definition previews, and as such should only be taken as a peek into the final product. Of that I can only say this: with *Varekai* the entire audience was up on its feet during the final Russian Swing number, for *Koozâ* a total of four standing ovations were given DURING the show, but for *Ovo*... timid applause. Does this mean the show is a dud? By no means. It just needs a little more work. And it will come. I can't wait to see how this show evolves over the next few months!





MAY 2009

«Kumbalawé-mana, Urulimé!»

Saltimbanco in Lakeland

If you ever need re-affirmation that Cirque du Soleil still has some magic left within, I invite you to experience Saltimbanco on its arena tour. Despite the lack of intimacy one finds inside the Grand Chapiteau, Saltimbanco is still as fresh, as fun, and as colorful as it was on the day



it premiered. Those infamous Baroques are every bit the worthy ambassadors Cirque has set them up to be (having used Saltimbanco to open up new markets for the past few years), and I cannot imagine the day when the Cavaliers' light is extinguished over them forever. When that day finally comes it will be a sad one indeed because we will be without one of the best and shining examples of classic Cirque du Soleil spectacles that still remains relevant years after its first tour began. I may weep...

Saltimbanco is a phantasmagorical exploration into metropolis life in all its myriad forms, and everything that shapes it: the people, their idiosyncrasies and the roles they play. With the majority of Earth's population destined to live in large, sprawling cities, Saltimbanco was created as an antidote to the violence and despair typically found within, and proposes a new vision of urbanity, overflowing with optimism and happiness; a kaleidoscopic adventure in which anything can happen in an imaginary city where diversity is a cause for hope.

The framework of Saltimbanco - the characters - like all human beings, are born with nothing. These are the Worms, at the very base of society. All similar in appearance yet different one from the other, they must with time adapt themselves to their environment. Thus, throughout the fable, they embody various types of social characters, hoping to one day accede to the rank of Baroque, a cast of visionaries. The Baroques constitute the most important family in the world of Saltimbanco. Armed with a deeply perceptive vision of the world, the Baroques reveal the countless contradictions of our civilization and show us that imagination is our power.

Tonight I spent the evening at Saltimbanco in Lakeland.

I told myself there was only a slim possibility - a 1% chance at best - that I would see the show in Lakeland tonight (I do have plans to see Saltimbanco in Tampa Bay), but when I awoke this morning and shook off the sleep inertia, I quickly fell uninterested in the item I was working on, so I began to think and made a decision.

It turned out to be an excellent one -- Saltimbanco tonight was the *most awesomeist* ever! And I came away with an excitement about Cirque du Soleil that I haven't had in months. Thank you Saltimbanco. Truly, thank you.



Everyone performed to perfection tonight - the entire cast was light, airy and so involved with their character; seeing such happiness and enjoyment of one's persona tickled me to no end. It's wonderful when a performer gets deeply into his or her character so much so that their personality's merge; that's what you see here at Saltimbanco. That enjoyment trickled over to the artists performing acts on-stage; every number went on tonight - nothing was missing (except for the female Boledora, and that I can forgive as the male lived it up like nobody's business). Even duo trapeze was on, which I had heard in conversation sometimes isn't performed on the final day of performances. I even lucked out with the crowd, as those in attendance (at about 75%) were very into the show, even though not every seat was filled.

Saltimbanco is presented in two halves over a two and a half-hour production. After the curtain is pulled away, a number of acts parade by: Adagio (three acrobats who show an act of strength, flexibility, balance and grace as they meld their bodies together), Chinese Poles (the worms slither across the stage, climb up and leap from pole to pole), Artistic Bicycle (an unusual bike ride in the park), Juggling (an amazing show of juggling rhythm), and Boledoras (a simple percussion instrument made of a weight attached to the end of a cord is twirled and bounced, exploding in sound) round out act one. The second half of the show explodes with the Baroques taking to the Russian Swing (a swinging apparatus that catapults artists up to 30 feet in the air!), Duo Trapeze (an amazing display of harmony and mirror imagery), Hand-to-Hand (two men engaged in a tremendous display of power and unwavering sense of balance), and Bungees (an aerial ballet tied to bungees evoking the flight of birds soaring in the sky). Everyone loved it!

But there's probably a reason for all the great reception.

It appears folks from La Nouba were in the house tonight (seated to my right) and they were "living it up", as it were. Of course, the performers at Saltimbanco had nothing but warm welcomes for them, which they showcased on-stage: some dressed as La Nouba characters!

The first nod to the circusters in the audience came in the opening dance for the shows' second half - the green bird appeared under the

musician's stand, cavorting around! Most of the audience knew nothing different, but me, and the entire section to my right, whooped, hollered and cheered! The Green Bird appeared only briefly, as compared to the other Baroque characters, but her little quick tip-toe dance she does sure brought the house down.

The second nod came during a point in the Russian Swings number at a point where the Baroques have all filled the stage, dancing wildly about in their own kind of ecstasy. Normally they break off and continue jumping off the swing, but all of the sudden the music changes from the rocking tunes of "Barok" and switches immediately to "Once Upon a Time" from La Nouba. The Baroques suddenly stop, get into position and jump from side-to-side like they do at the start of La Nouba - it was fantastic! And, of course, me, and the group to my right, were eating it up.



Green Bird made another appearance when Death appeared on stage, scaring the Baroques (she was one of the frightened!). And even a Les Con got his day in the Saltimbanco sun when the Ringmaster came running back on stage, screaming out of breath. The Les Con, played by the artistic bicyclist (Ivan Dô-Dùc), trotted to the center of the stage, looked out at the audience, pulled on his skirt in the same fashion as the real Les Cons do in La Nouba, then just nonchalantly walked off.

While only the folks from La Nouba and those in the know (like myself) knew anything out of the ordinary had occurred, these touches were simply fantastic and totally made my night.

Thank you guys!
See you in Tampa Bay!