



# **TOUR 3**

**2009-2014**

# Live to Cirque



## THIRD TOUR: 2009-2014

*Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter / Little  
darling, it feels like years since it's been here / Here comes  
the sun / Here comes the sun, and I say / It's all right*

*Little darling, the smiles returning to the faces / Little  
darling, it seems like years since it's been here / Here comes  
the sun / Here comes the sun, and I say / It's all right*

*Sun, sun, sun, here it comes...*

“Here Comes the Sun” is one of George Harrison’s best-known Beatles contributions alongside “Something” and “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” and according to Harrison it “was written at a time when Apple [The Beatles’ company] was getting [to be] like school, where we had to go and be businessmen: ‘Sign this’ and ‘sign that’. Anyway, it seems as if winter in England goes on forever and by the time spring comes you really deserve it. So one day I decided I was going to sag off Apple. The relief of not having to go see all those dopey accountants was wonderful.” I find myself particularly drawn to this song as its underlying meaning for Mr. Harrison seemed to inform mine about CirqueCon wholeheartedly. From the corporatization of the organization to the scuffles of getting events approved, a toll was taken and it just wasn’t worth the effort anymore.

But thankfully other actions during this period were.

Internal interest in *Fascination* was reignited and had its status as a monthly periodical returned. Although *Fascination* had largely stopped publishing by mid-2005, it wasn’t out for the count. Rather than publish monthly in 2006, a series of “Quarterly Compendiums”, which compiled all the news and features posted to *Fascination*’s website/blog during the dated period. By the following year we realized there was enough material released through the blog to try and publish bi-monthly. There were issues for Jan/Feb and Mar/Apr 2007 before publication mysteriously ceased, again. The CirqueCon 2007 battleground that was waging correlates to this cessation.

By mid 2007 I was seriously contemplating shutting *Fascination* down completely; that or merging the blog with *Le Grand Chapiteau*. Either way I didn’t want to publish the newsletter portion any longer – it took a lot of time and effort to assemble the text that was already being published in an easier-to-read medium, so why bother? In spite of the internal strife, or perhaps because of it, CirqueCon 2007 turned out to be a great success and my spirits became much improved. And the gathering that came out of it for Wintuk in New York City (Celebri) was a lot of fun too; therefore, efforts in *Fascination* were once again renewed, re-creating the missing issues from 2007, releasing a new issue for Jan/Feb 2008 and continuing to release by-monthly throughout 2008.



In January 2009, as the Nov/Dec 2008 issue was hitting the newsstands, I began to wonder: could we go monthly with *Fascination* again? Indeed! Since Cirque du Soleil had embraced social media in a big way, creating presences on Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook, there was plenty of material to pull from, correlate, and notify interested readers about. Therefore, *Fascination* went back to publishing monthly that May. Although content was being posted all over the web, which gave *Fascination* a new lease on life, collating it also became quite a monotonous labor. With the problems at CirqueCon persisting, my enthusiasm regarding Cirque dropping once more, and my life getting more and more complicated, I was beginning to contemplate those old plans from 2007: merge Le Grand Chapiteau with *Fascination*? Stop publishing the newsletter and focus on the blog? Or close down the entire endeavor for good? This time I kept these feelings to myself until January 2012's issue went to press; only there in the issues introductory paragraph did I elude to the fact that something might be amiss.

It was not a decision I was taking lightly, even if my enthusiasm for all things Cirque had waned considerably. I set a goal – reaching issue #100 which I'd do in May 2012 – therefore, I suggested to myself I would see how IRIS turned out (CirqueCon 2011 in Hollywood), judge Michael Jackson The Immortal (playing in Vegas just after CirqueCon), and see how well I took to the new touring show, AMALUNA. In effect, Cirque du Soleil was given a three-strikes-and-you're-out roadmap! Unfortunately both IRIS and MJ IMMORTAL were strike-outs (IRIS more like a foul ball at the last minute) and so it all came down to AMALUNA. In the newsletter it was business as usual – I wouldn't mention the pending decision again until the 100<sup>th</sup> issue hit (mostly because I didn't know myself), but I would prepare for both possibilities. When the 100<sup>th</sup> issue came around I was comfortable with my decision, explaining it in that issue's introductory paragraph:

Reaching one hundred of anything is a milestone to be celebrated. For us here at *Fascination*, reaching our 100th issue is nothing short of a miracle. Who would have thought that, back in the summer of 2001, the publication we were scraping to put together would still be around more than 10 years later? Although I believed in the vision, the mission and the power of *Fascination*, I could never have imagined we would ever reach this particular achievement.

Over the course of the last few months I have been contemplating the cessation of *Fascination*'s publication as my interest in Cirque du Soleil has evolved greatly from those early days.

Because, make no mistake, publishing is a labor. Meeting deadlines, scrambling for content and finding interest in not-so-interesting developments takes its toll. Even with that being true, crafting *Fascination* has been a labor of love, so contemplating its final moments has been sad. Why then, after so many years of servicing the Cirque du Soleil fan community, would I contemplate giving up something that I love? Things evolve. Life moves forward. Desires change. Disappointments come more frequently.

Over the last couple of years I have not hidden the fact that I've been more disappointed in Cirque du Soleil than delighted, and have written much about that here in the pages of Fascination on more than one occasion. Perhaps most of that can be attributed to the fact that I have been witness to Cirque du Soleil at its very best and cannot - will not - settle for anything less than perfection. And when those expectations aren't lived up to (Banana Shpeel, Viva Elvis, Zarkana and Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL I'm looking at you), you become fatigued, apathetic, and cynical. In other words I became jaded.

But just when I thought there was little left to say, that Fascination had run its course and I could feel comfortable ending a legacy that has endured a number of years (and two other previous attempts at closing the doors), my world got turned upside down.

Suddenly I found myself... enthused about Cirque du Soleil again.

Recent changes in Mystère, my all-time favorite Cirque du Soleil show, have given me hope that excitement and wonder can still be found in even those things that are most familiar. Though Wintuk, Banana Shpeel, ZED, ZAIA and Viva Elvis have had (or will have) their final curtain calls, their closure has helped (or will help) bring attention to Cirque's remaining shows and on its future, something fans have been rallying around for quite some time. And yes, even the announcement that Zarkana will now replace Viva Elvis at Aria is exciting news to me - there's untapped potential there, I can feel it.

So perhaps there is a little magic left to explore after all!

Thus I have been reminded of a conceptual quote from Alegría as I've mulled over this decision. It says, in just thirteen words, exactly what I've been feeling: « Once everything has been said and done, who says you can't start over? »

So why not? Who says we can't start over? It's perfect!

Although I cannot guarantee that Fascination will be around forever, let alone reach issue #200, or even remain a monthly publication, I can at least say that we're not done just yet. In the meantime I look forward to the next goal: Issue #125. And should we continue publishing monthly, that goal will coincide nicely with another auspicious milestone: Cirque du Soleil's 30th Anniversary. So keep a weather eye out for June 2014.

And here we are: Cirque du Soleil's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I made it. Fascination made it (and has committed to publish to issue #150). Moreover Cirque du Soleil made it. While I can't know for how much longer I will follow the sun, these past fifteen years have been full of delights. Who knows: perhaps in another five years we'll tack on a FOURTH TOUR! In the meantime...



JUNE 2009

## « Le Reve Continue »

Celebrating Cirque's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

In 2004, to mark its 20th anniversary in a "slightly eccentric way", Cirque du Soleil embarked on a quest to set the first Guinness World Record for stilt walking. Cirque succeeded, drawing on 544 of its employees from the International Headquarters in Montreal to help reach their goal. But it would not stand. Two years later a group of Japanese would take the record with 614 stilt-walkers and in 2008, 625 young people from Bradford, Ontario would claim the title. When looking for ideas to celebrate their 25th anniversary, well, stilt walking and an attempt to reclaim the title was a no-brainer. But rather than just having a few hundred employees at their headquarters in Montreal attempt to break the record, Cirque du Soleil enlisted its employee's world-wide and the public was invited to join the Cirque du Soleil stilts' in select cities around the world!



And with a troupe preparing to take to the stilts in Orlando, you can bet I was there... But why stilt-walking you might ask? The discipline is deeply rooted in Cirque's origins, the Club des Talons Hauts. In 1980, Gilles Ste-Croix walked 56 miles on stilts to convince the Quebec government to offer him a grant. It did so and he formed the Club, which became the forbearer of Cirque du Soleil...

\* \* \*

### /// BREAKING RECORDS

As soon as Cirque du Soleil announced they would be celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a global stilt-walking event, I knew I wanted to be part of it. Cirque du Soleil invited its artists and employees in Montreal, Quebec (Cirque du Soleil's HQ); Las Vegas, USA (with all six resident shows); New York City (with the KOOZA team); Lisbon, Portugal (with the VAREKAI team); Macau, China (with the ZAIA team); Tokyo, Japan (with the ZED team); Nagoya, Japan (with the CORTEO team), Fortaleza, Brazil (with the QUIDAM team), Orlando, USA (with the LA NOUBA team), and those in Moscow's Red Square to gather on June 16, 2009 and help it reclaim the title. Luckily with Cirque du Soleil's La Nouba set up permanently in my backyard - at Downtown Disney West Side, Orlando - I had the opportunity to join the stilt-walkers there and do just that.



I left work at about 3:30pm - much later than I had anticipated. Normally I work until just a little past 5:00pm, but because I knew of the Cirque du Soleil event in advance, I asked to be let out a little early, and had approval to leave at 3:00pm that day - plenty of time to get to the La Nouba Theater. Wouldn't you know a meeting scheduled for the wee hours of the morning had to be rescheduled until the afternoon, and then ran over time? Naturally! Be that

as it may, having traversed the roads from my workplace to Downtown Disney a number of times, I knew the drive would take no more than 20 minutes so long as traffic was moving at a respectable clip. Drivers here in Orlando have to be concerned with that last part, for part of my journey would take me down a segment of Interstate 4, notorious for backups and congestions for no good reason.

Although I left much later than I had wanted, the timetable was running rather smoothly and I was starting to relax and prepare myself for what I was about to see. Unfortunately something put the brakes on my timetable... - you guessed it - I reached the on-ramp to the interstate. There cars came to a crawl, lining each of the four lanes as far as I could see. Oh no! I was going to miss the stilt-walking event - the whole entire reason I was leaving work early in the first place! I banged on the steering wheel, cursed at the skies and screamed at the cars in front of me to get a move on, without much of a change. And it never let up. By the time I reached the Downtown Disney Westside parking lot, signs-up to participate in the stilt walking had closed. But I did arrive just in time to see the event take place.



Around 120 Cirque employees and fans alike took part in the attempt, walking 100 yards from behind the House of Blues to the base of the La Nouba building. Folks came in all sorts of dress -- from casual to full on Cirque makeup and Lycra -- and in a variety of stilt heights, from low riders to about four feet off the ground. Some were obvious novices, moving in deliberate baby-stilt steps and gripping the poles, while others took giant, confident strides; all

were having fun. One of the participants, who kept his feet firmly planted on the ground, was Orlando Mayer Buddy Dyer - he proclaimed it "Cirque du Soleil Day" in the Orlando metro area!

Following the stilt-walking record-breaking attempt (which was later verified by the Guinness folks), three La Nouba performers attempted to set individual records.

Marcos de Jesus, one of the BMX bicyclists in the troupe, went for the record in "pinky squeaks", a trick that involves standing on the bike's front tire and whipping the back half around in a circle and jumping over its body. The previous record was 57 in a minute; on de Jesus' second attempt, he accomplished 63 without missing a beat. Lance Trappe attempted to establish a Guinness record with 108 front wheel hops (a feat hard to accomplish once you see him try to do it in person). And Rokardy, the Balancing on Chairs performer, created a new record category by walking on his hands while on stilts. He walked a record 119 feet down the path outside the theater.



As interesting as it was to watch records breaking or being made for the very first time, a more thrilling experience for me would be had inside the theater.



### /// BECOMING PART OF THE CELEBRATION

I almost didn't go to the show.

Prior to driving down to Downtown Disney in hopes of taking part in the stilt-walking adventure, Nicole and I contemplated seeing the 9:00pm performance of the show itself. But with Nicole working in Sanford and Downtown Disney a solid hours' drive from there in good traffic, those plans were canceled. So when the record-breaking events had concluded, I had a decision to make: go back to my apartment in Celebration, grab dinner and see the 9:00pm performance as originally planned, check into ticket availability for the 6:00pm performance, which was due to begin in less than 30 minutes, or just go home and forget the whole endeavor.

After once again conferring with Nicole via phone I made a decision: I'd go to the 6:00pm performance.



Imagine my surprise, then, when I called upon the box office and was advised front-row center seats were available - yes, in section 103 - right in the line of Les Cons selection territory for the show's infamous Bike Jump routine. Having recently had fifteen minutes of fame at *Mystère* in Las Vegas (by becoming Bebe Francois' "papa"), my eyes lit up. What if? Wouldn't it be cool if I got the opportunity to be part of La Nouba on Cirque's 25th

Anniversary? I sprang for those tickets immediately, and sat at my seat at the cleft of the stage thrust in anticipation.

Thankfully I wasn't lost in those thoughts. Prior to entering the theater's seating arrangements, each patron was handed a small drawstring bag with a note attached that read: thanks for being part of Cirque du Soleil's birthday celebrations. Inside was a red clown nose and further instructions to use them at a special point during the show. When Cirque La Nouba Company Manager Richard Dennison took to the stage with a birthday cake just prior to the show's starting moments, I knew we were in for a special night. He advised us to put on our clown noses and to turn them on; yes, they blinked! Once we did so the entire theater's compliment would be photographed (a group shot only) forever capturing the participants in Cirque's 25th anniversary here at La Nouba.



Awesome stuff!

Thinking my part to participate in the show over, I doffed my clown nose (as advised), and the show began. But as soon as we reached the BMX portion of the show, roughly halfway in, I looked on with excited trepidation. It would be here, during this routine, I would either get my second fifteen minutes of fame at a Cirque du Soleil show, or I would miss it... again. And though I would be sad, having not been given the opportunity the other dozen or so time I've seen the show wouldn't take away from my enjoyment of it all.



Much of the BMX routine is performed on stage, with one performing squeaks on a small trick bicycle while another races about, bounces on his front tire, read tire, ascends stairs or flies down ramps on a much larger all-terrain "mountain" cycle. It's the mountain bike routine I held my breath for. During his performance, some of which takes place within the seating audience, the performer rushes here and there on stage, much to the amusement of the Les Cons characters, nutty child-like personages that exist within the universe of La Nouba. He ascends a stairwell between the first front sections of seats, crosses behind the center seating section, and then descends the red-carpeted stairs on the other side, jumping back onto the stage using nothing but his tires and a lot of skill.

With the Les Cons looking at the actions of this performer with growing curiosity, they become bolder - putting themselves in his way or creating obstacles for him to overcome, which he navigates around with ease. As each "trick" ushered by the Les Cons becomes ever increasingly harder, two of the Les Cons lay their bodies in the bicyclist's path, seemingly daring him to overcome this challenge by jumping over them.

After the pair stare at one another, the bicyclist takes the challenge, rushing forward in a flurry of pedals, but as he prepares to take the jump over the enterprising nuts, the cyclist slams on his brakes at the last possible moment, the squelch of the straining handle-bar brakes echoing throughout the theater. As he comes to a dead stop, one of the Les Cons has taken notice - the front tire just mere centimeters from his nose. The Les Con, completely frightened and reexamining his precarious decision, jumps up and joins his other two compatriots, who were standing quizzically nearby.

He wasn't about to put himself in harm's way, but...



There was a whole audience full of "volunteers" and the Les Cons rushed out to meet them... us. And I looked on with excited trepidation. Here they come... searching, looking, watching... A Les Con looked down at me - I smiled back. He went off and looked elsewhere - darn! Another came, looked down at me and smiled, then he went to join his friend - drat! And then the next thing I knew, they've yanked me out of my chair - WOOOOOSH!

OH. MY. GOD.

Before they even set me down upon the stage I started shaking... mostly with excitement but there was a twinge of fear too. I wanted this experience and sat in the precise spot to become a contender, but as I stared up into the ceiling of the La Nouba theater in the quick seconds it took to transport me - vertically I might add - from my seat to the thrust of the stage - I began to wonder just what in the hell did I get myself into by purchasing those seats tonight.

Be careful what you wish for... you just might get it.

Within moments the Les Cons set me down upon the stage's thrust and turned me round to face the audience, all the while keeping silent. I smile wearily. Laughter abounds.

Here we go. What do I do? What should I do?

You know, I always planned for this too. Thinking about what I would do and how I would perform if, say, La Nouba's clowns ever interacted with me. Would I go up on stage and sit once they placed my tickets there? You betcha! And naturally I had thoughts about how I would ham things up if I ever got selected for the bike jump. I'd make it memorable, for sure...

It's one thing to have all the time in the world to think about what you would do if... but an entirely different thing to have to think and execute as it is happening.

My palms became sweaty.  
My breathing came more harshly.



My heart was pounding so hard in my chest I could hear every lub-dub in both ears.

My mind went completely blank.

I waved... tentatively... looking out over the audience shrouded in darkness (it's very hard to see the audience, even those sitting in the front row, with spotlights trained on you) - but nothing happened.

More laughter. Oh, that's right; one of the Les Cons has taken my seat, no doubt availing himself to the woman seated next to me. Did they know we weren't together? It didn't matter.

Okay, so now wha--WHOA!!

Just as soon as I got comfortable standing there in the spotlight, the remaining Les Cons grabbed me up again, put me vertical, and then placed me flat on the ground. The first Les Con from before took his spot a few inches away from me on my right and the act was put into motion.

\*gulp\*

So there I was laying flat against the front of La Nouba's stage, staring up at the theater's "seven sisters" sculpture, keenly aware of the band playing the hushed tones of "Distorted", the audience laughing and the cyclist's bicycle in motion and... I flailed.

Laughter!

My mind was racing. Where was the bicyclist now? When would he--SKREEEECH! Oh, there he is... just off to my left. I allowed myself a quick peek with my eyes, shifting them left. Yep, there he was...

I shifted my eyes back right and found the Les Con doing the same thing, we looked at each other briefly, and then both began to flail together. Although we flailed briefly, the audience loved it, and in moments we were as tightly packed - shoulder to shoulder - as we were going to get. With arms and hands tucked in, and the bicyclist preparing for his jump to my right, time absolutely stood still.

I breathed in...

Closed my eyes...

Breathed out...

Opened my eyes...

Then - BOUNCE!

OHSIIIIIIII!



With bike and performer straining with effort, he launched sideways, taking the front tire over me first, and then the back. A split second or two later, as he disappeared from my peripheral view, I heard a loud thump, thunderous applause, and the band crescendo - he'd done it!

PHEW!

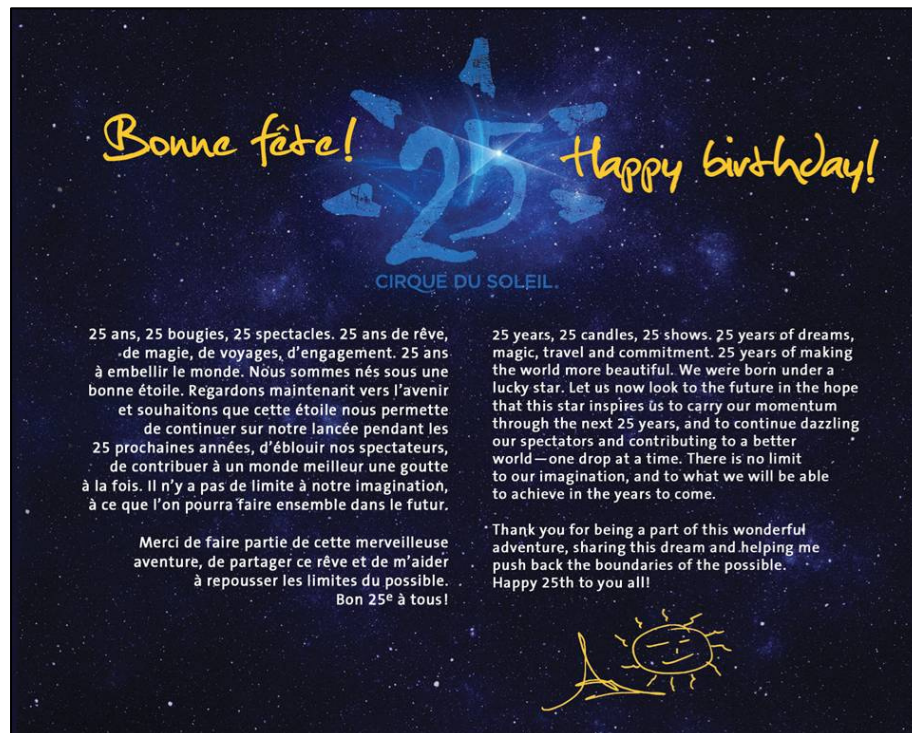
Within moments I was standing upright again with a helping hand of my Les Con friend, and taking bows – “great mate!” he said, patting me on the back for a job well done, and just like that I had another fifteen minutes of fame at a Cirque du Soleil show.

I left the stage immediately after another bow and took my seat as quickly as possible. As I attempted to collect my thoughts, catch my breath and still my racing heart, a number of patrons around me patted me on the back and smiled at my misfortune. But as for me, still visibly shaken by the experience, I was on cloud nine. Finally, after eleven years and a dozen viewings of La Nouba, I was part of the bike jump routine.

The fastidious high continued through the standing ovation and out into the lobby as patron after patron came over to congratulate me, talk to me, offer their condolences and ask whether or not I was scared, part of the show, or whether or not I knew that was going to happen. I answered all inquiries with a smile, assuring them that although I knew it was going to happen (I’d been trying for years), I was not an audience plant.

I was just a Cirque du Soleil fan who had gotten one heck of an anniversary present!

Cirque du Soleil – Le Rêve Continue!





SEPTEMBER 2009

## « Vive Apasionadamente! »

CirqueCon 2009: Monterrey, Mexico

*"Hey, are you a member of the CirqueCon group too?"*

Even before Continental Airlines flight #2277 from Houston, Texas touched down in Monterrey, Mexico at 10:55am on September 24, 2009, the magic of CirqueCon was already at work.

*"Why, yes, you as well?"*

As I was speaking to fellow Passionate and friend Gena Colton from Ohio in mid-flight about the adventure ahead (which in itself an amazing coincidence - she surprised me at the gate in Houston with an "excuse me, stranger" and ended up seated next to me in 10-C), I received a tap on the shoulder followed by a question. That tap turned out to be from Nora Shappee, another Passionate hailing from Michigan, seated directly behind us.

Whodathunk?

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 circus arts. Our humble story began in 2004 with fans proposing a small gathering during the Vancouver run of Quidam, which had just delighted audiences throughout Japan the year prior. While the tale of our genesis is somewhat more complicated than just "a coming together", suffice it to say, two individual groups did decide to band and make the trip as one. Add in a little folly from Cirque du Soleil and viola - CirqueCon came to be. Since then we've made similar

journeys in search of our favorite circus, which have taken us to a number of cities over the years: Montreal (2005), Las Vegas (2006), Orlando (2007), and Tokyo (2008). But like all reflections to be made before, during and after a gathering of this magnitude - once you reach your destination and the curtain falls on the event: what's next?



During the concept phase of *CirqueCon 2008: Tokyo* we thought perhaps after doing five straight events in the same number of years a break for rest and recuperation was in order, which would in turn give us the answer to that all important question. And although the very last page in our *CirqueCon 2008: Tokyo* programme book did mention our next confirmed event would be *CirqueCon 2010: Hollywood*, we never did say that we weren't gathering in 2009 (cheeky of us...). So when *CirqueCon 2010: Hollywood* became *CirqueCon 2011: Hollywood* (due to a delay with the show), and we received a passionate plea from our friend and Mexican fan extraordinaire Rodolfo Elizondo about taking CirqueCon to Mexico for Dralion's farewell, we couldn't pass up his enthusiasm and thus *CirqueCon 2009: Monterrey* was born!

Monterrey (pronounced with a heavy 'rrrrr') is a very modern Mexican city situated in the northeastern state of Nuevo León, approximately 150 miles south of the United States border near Texas. 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. Arts in all forms are very prevalent here, as Monterrey is the unofficial art capital of Mexico; and too so rich is the culture. Throughout the weekend we experienced only a little of what Monterrey, and really all of Mexico, had to offer by visiting its museums, conversing with its people, and shopping on its streets. But what an amazingly fun weekend we had!



A fantastic number of 70 plus "Passionates" joined us this year, the first time we have taken our event south of the border, and what an amazing mix of people we had. Breaking it down numerically, 30% hailed from the United States (representing the states of California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington) with the remaining 70% coming to us from within Mexico. Of those 70%, 45% were from the host city (Monterrey),

while the remaining 55% represented other parts of Mexico, such as Tijuana, Mexico City, Nuevo Laredo, Saltillo, Guadalajara, Merida, Torreon, Apodaca and San Luis Potosi. An amazing blend of peoples and cultures who truly lived the CirqueCon motto: Vive Apasionadamente - Live Passionately!

Here is our story.

\* \* \*



## /// THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>

Within moments of landing, I found Rodolfo and the three of us (Rodolfo, Gena and I) were on our way to the Holiday Inn Parque Fundidora, our headquarters hotel this year. We were in a bit of a rush too because within the hour Rodolfo and I were due at the tables set up in the hotel's lobby for our event's opening registration time. We made it! Dozens of Passionates from within Mexico dropped by to pick up their programme packet (filled with brochures and maps from places all around Monterrey), the Group Meal, City Tour, Cirque Activities, Group Show and Bohemia Night tickets, their badges, and other CirqueCon branded goodies (such as the T-Shirt, post-cards, and more!) Some just dropped by to say "Hola", including the real Patch Adams (who was also staying at the hotel), but that's a horse of a different color.



night after night after night - including the development of her own silk act - at La Nouba, Cirque du Soleil at Downtown Disney's West Side.

Late in the afternoon we kicked off our celebration at Dralion's white Grand Chapiteau with a unique chance to see artists training on an act added since the show was last in country - the Trampo Wall. While we waited at the gates, Ana Cuellar, La Nouba silk artist, met us there for an impromptu chat. As a native resident of Monterrey, she spoke to us about Monterrey's art scene, her travels within Mexico and about her life here before Cirque. Ana also shared with us her trials and tribulations performing



Before long we took our seats inside the Grand Chapiteau to watch an amazing training session featuring Double Trapeze and Trampoline. One of Ana's friends (and Cirque alum) was there training for the TrampoWall routine; picking up his role rather quickly I might add. And why not, he's a trampoline artist from La Nouba!

After receiving numerous applause from us for sticking a tramp-jump hand stand, he left the stage. The boys and girls of the Double Trapeze routine took to the rafters off and on throughout our time, warming up for their performance later tonight, no doubt, doing equally as well.



After training concluded, Bruce Mather, Artistic Director for Dralion, and a couple of trampoline artists (Dustin Hill, Alejandro Cuenca, Oskana Pochynok, and Ulf Hampus Jansson) joined us for a question and answer session. And although shy at first - our Passionate fans' eyes were just round with admiration for them - they began asking question upon question. What is it like to tour with Cirque? What is your favorite show? What about Dralion do you like? How do you like Mexico fans? What will you do after Dralion closes?



"Uhhh..." What? Shh, they didn't know!



In all we spent a good solid two hours with our friends at Cirque du Soleil but our time with Dralion that afternoon was drawing to a close. Before they let us out of the Grand Chapiteau for the day, however, Bruce had one final announcement for us - we were to join them again Saturday evening between shows for a back-stage group photograph with a few of the artists in costume! WOW!

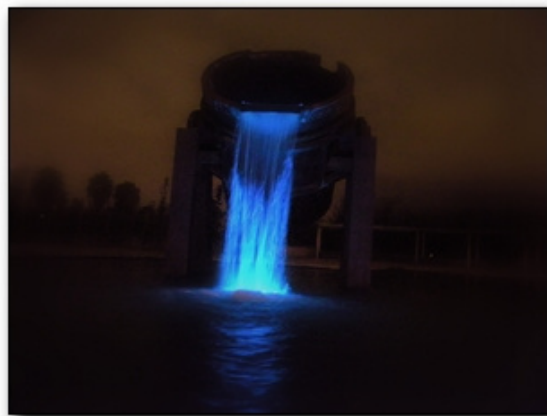


With the sun now setting beautifully in the sky, it was time to make our way back across the park for our evening stroll around Parque Fundidora's famous Blast Furnace (Horno 3) area and our cruise down the Paseo Santa Lucía to the Macroplaza, our cultural answer to CirqueCon's traditional Meet & Greet activity.

One of the most interesting and best modes of transportation in Monterrey is the 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.



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 (how about those floats?) but by the tour guide driving the boat.



Fantastico!



## /// FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25<sup>TH</sup>

The morning got off to quite an early start. I was due down at the open registration tables bright and early - 8:00am - before we embarked on our twelve-hour tour of Monterrey city and its environs, a unique and customized tour in Monterrey created by Rodolfo exclusively for the members of CirqueCon 2009, visiting museums, shopping plazas, natural places and more! Although there were a few last-minute bumps in our plan (the weather did not cooperate - it started to rain - and our bus was a few minutes late), we took it all in stride and had a smashing day out and about. Highlights include...

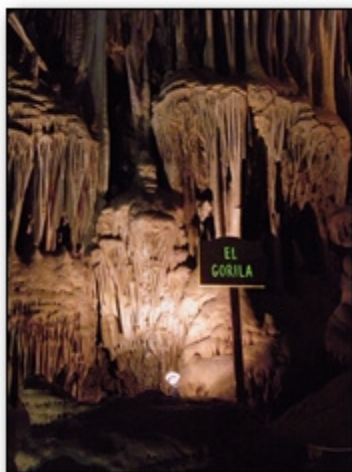
Puente de la Unidad -- A cable-style bridge that crosses the mostly dry Santa Catarina River. It is one of Monterrey's highest and most artistically designed bridges.

Grutas de García (Garcia Caves) -- 60 million year old caverns beautifully lining the inside of El Fraile, one of Monterrey's famous mountains, awaited us some 30 kilometers outside of the city's limits. Featuring a rocky-desert with a number of impressive rock formations and chambers, the caves were a uniquely cool (pun intended) place to visit. Some of most spectacular features of Garcia Caves are "La Octavia Maravilla" (the Eighth Miracle), a formation whereby a stalagmite merged with a stalactite to form a column; the "El Mirador de la Mano", a stalagmite that formed in the shape of a human hand; "El Nacimiento", a formation known as "The Nativity"; "El Teatro", a huge rock formation nicknamed "The Theater"; and "La Gorila", a Gorilla shaped formation embedded in the cavern wall. To reach the cavern's entrance we had to ascend the mountain via an aerial tramway, which afforded us fantastic views of the surrounding peaks.









The Cañon de la Huasteca -- One of Monterrey's most famous natural wonders featuring beautiful 300 meter cliffs surrounded by woodlands and jagged peaks is La Huasteca, a stunningly beautiful mountain range.



The Macroplaza -- 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, including 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), the Capilla de los Dulces Nombres, a 19<sup>th</sup> century roman catholic chapel; and the Faro del Comercio (Lighthouse of Commerce), a 70 meter tall square lighthouse equipped with a green laser that shoots its light out over the city at night.





Monterrey's museums are also located nearby, such as MUNE (or Museum of the North East, showcasing the history of this part of Mexico) and the Museo de Historia Mexicana, or Museum of Mexican History. Although MUNE is fascinating I find the Museo de Historia Mexicana to be the diamond in the ruff. 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").



Whew, that's a lot of walking about isn't it -- who said Margaritas!?



By the conclusion of our tour at the MacroPlaza and the nearby museums we were all bushed, but our day was not yet over. After just a couple of hours to rest, relax and recharge, for some of us it was back on the bus for Bohemia Night, CirqueCon's night on the town! It is said that Monterrey doesn't come alive until after 1:00am and for the most part I can say that is definitely true.

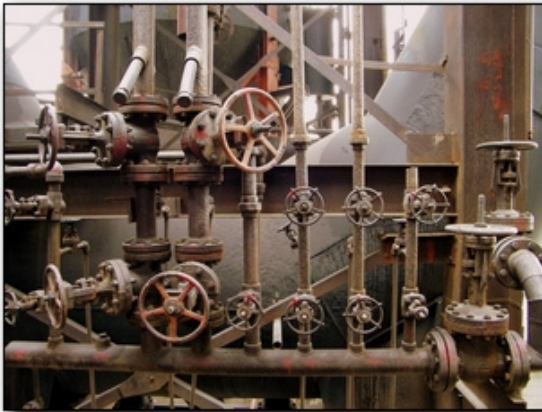
Twenty-two of us braved the early-morning call to descend upon Nueva Luna for a little food, a little fun, and a little refreshment - Mexican style. While we rocked the night away to the band's repertoire of rock, pop, salsa and traditional north Mexican beats, the staff of Nueva Luna kept us filled with steak and chicken fajitas, tortillas, and various accoutrements. And once the alcohol started flowing there was no stopping us! Bus transportation to and from the Holiday Inn Parque Fundidora to Nueva Luna Restaurant was included and return trips back to the hotel occurred in three increments, in case anyone wished to leave a little earlier at 1:00am, 2:00am or 3:00am. I chose to leave a little early myself - on the second bus - but oh man did I have a blast!



### **/// SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26<sup>TH</sup>**

With the previous night's late return coupled with today's early arrival, you'd think many of us would be dragging - but you'd be wrong! We were up and ready for our exploration of Horno 3 at Parque Fundidora.

The Horno 3 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; patrons can explore 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), you can also 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 explore 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), you can take 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.)



Then we assembled in the lobby of our headquarters hotel for yet another trip on the bus. This time we were off to Hacienda San Angel for our group meal!





After, we were off to Mirador del Obispado (Bishop's Lookout), which is located atop Cerro del Obispado, the hill of the same name for yet another fantastic view of the city. Rising about 775 meters above sea level, this viewpoint is adorned with a fabulous 18<sup>th</sup> century palace and a number of steps that make this one photogenic spot. 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 nearby, but due to time constraints we had to make our way back to the Parque for Dralion.





We assembled outside the gates of the Grand Chapiteau for our amazing opportunity to take a group photograph with some of the artists backstage; see Dralion, the extraordinary voyage through a futuristic dimension - a place without time, ruled by magical laws - a fusion of ancient Chinese circus tradition with the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil thrust into a plane of existence that is neither past nor future; and then re-assemble after at the cast gates out back to give the artists a grand CirqueCon send-off!



Who were those guys with the yellow bandanas?



\* \* \*



If you didn't come to CirqueCon 2009: Monterrey you really missed something special. We had lots of fun with much laughter and kinship, and by the end we all came away with a newfound appreciation for Mexico and its history and culture. Not to mention a renewed sense of wonder of Cirque du Soleil's Dralion.

But if you missed out on CirqueCon 2009: Monterrey, or any of our previous events, we have two very exciting adventures coming in 2010 and 2011, which will take CirqueCon Coast-to-Coast!

CIRQUECON 2010: NEW YORK CITY + MONTREAL - THREE SHOWS. TWO CITIES. ONE EVENT /// Join us from April 27<sup>th</sup> through May 2<sup>nd</sup> as we journey north and east to The Big Apple for one of Cirque du Soleil's latest productions (Banana Shpeel), take in OVO under the Grand Chapiteau, then travel to Montréal for Cirque's latest touring production, TOTEM.

CIRQUECON 2011: HOLLYWOOD - LIGHTS, CAMERA, CIRQUE! /// Then we're back on the western frontier in 2011 as CirqueCon breaks into the movies with another of Cirque's newest productions: Cirque Kodak in Hollywood, California!





APRIL 2010

## « A New Twist on CirqueCon »

CirqueCon 2010: New York & Montreal



Over the years, CirqueCon has journeyed across oceans and transcended borders, reaching fans of Cirque du Soleil in Canada, North America, and Japan to great success. And while it had only been a few short months since we'd wrapped up our very successful multi-cultural event in Monterrey, Mexico (CirqueCon 2009; thanks to all!), before long we were ready to jump back into the fray and announce our next exciting CirqueCon adventure - CirqueCon 2010: New York City.

But as we gathered for the seventh time since our inception, not only did we find ourselves once again witnessing the evolution of some of Cirque du Soleil's newest productions - BANANA SHPEEL, a new traveling venue concept staged at the historical Beacon Theater in Manhattan and OVO under the Grand Chapiteau at Randal's Island Park, both in New York City, and TOTEM, a new traveling spectacle opening under the Grand Chapiteau on the Quay's of the Old Port of Montréal - we also found ourselves part of a nouvelle expérience at CirqueCon.

There'd be more to our 2010 event than just exploring "The Big Apple"; for the first time we expanded our traditional weekend to encompass two separate locations spanning a distance over five-hundred kilometers: one, a new and exciting metropolis for Passionates to explore, a city that never sleeps; the other, a cobblestone-lined historical village, with the familiarity of a heartwarming homecoming. To accommodate both cities we added two extra fun-filled days to our schedule!



So as we now come close to unleashing CirqueCon 2011 in Hollywood for Cirque du Soleil's IRIS, and scaling back our traditional weekend so Passionates may incorporate CirqueWeek in Las Vegas should they choose (not to mention reveling in the festivities surrounding MICHAEL JACKSON THE IMMORTAL WORLD TOUR performing at Mandalay Bay during that time), I'm excited to relive CirqueCon 2010: New York City & Montréal with you. Think you're ready for a CirqueCon experience? Then join us for IRIS in Hollywood!

Bridging oceans and transcending borders while taking in three Cirque du Soleil productions (two of which were brand new at the time) was an exciting step for us. One we hoped everyone enjoyed to the fullest.

THREE SHOWS. TWO CITIES. ONE EVENT.

### /// WEDNESDAY, APRIL 28<sup>TH</sup>

A hallmark of CirqueCon is our Meet & Greet; it's a chance to socialize as a group in a much more relaxed, slow-paced setting. In years past we've partied with the cast and crew of La Nouba after an incredible group show (at CirqueCon 2007: Orlando), raised such a ruckus that the hotel staff tried to shut us down twice (at CirqueCon 2008: Tokyo), and took a cruise down the Paseo Santa Lucía to the Macroplaza (our cultural answer to CirqueCon's traditional Meet & Greet activity for CirqueCon 2009: Monterrey). We kicked off our New York City excursion early in the morning (from 8:30am to 9:30am), holding our Meet & Greet in the lobby of our Headquarters Hotel, within a specially designated space at the "On The Ave" hotel. I was there handing out our Convention Packet (consisting of our annual Programme Book, specially created buttons, and our identity badges), fulfilled our official T-Shirt orders and even had posters for Passionates to make their mark upon. It was a nice get-together on our first morning together, filled with friends, fun, food and festivities!



With our

group

viewing of OVO scheduled for later in the evening (at 7:00pm), the rest of the day was open to all Passionates, and we let them loose upon Manhattan accordingly. Where they would go and what they would do was up to each guest, but for one Passionate and I, we were in to fulfilling dreams. As it was Josh McCall's first-ever visit to New York City, he not only wanted to see the Statue of Liberty from a close vantage point, he also wanted to climb to the top of her crown. Since the National Park Service recently re-opened the crown to the general public (shut down after the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers), I booked us an excursion time (many months in advance) and away we went!

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 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. A journey to Liberty from Manhattan starts down at the Circle Line docks, as ours did, but ours did not end until we climbed all 354 steps to the crown (that's 192 to reach the top of the pedestal and another 162 to reach the crown). And with spiral steps only 19 inches wide, shallow and tapered at one end, with barely a 6-foot clearance, doing so was clearly an arduous affair, but so very, very worth it. Did you know the rays on liberty's crown are meant to evoke the seven seas and the seven continents of the world?

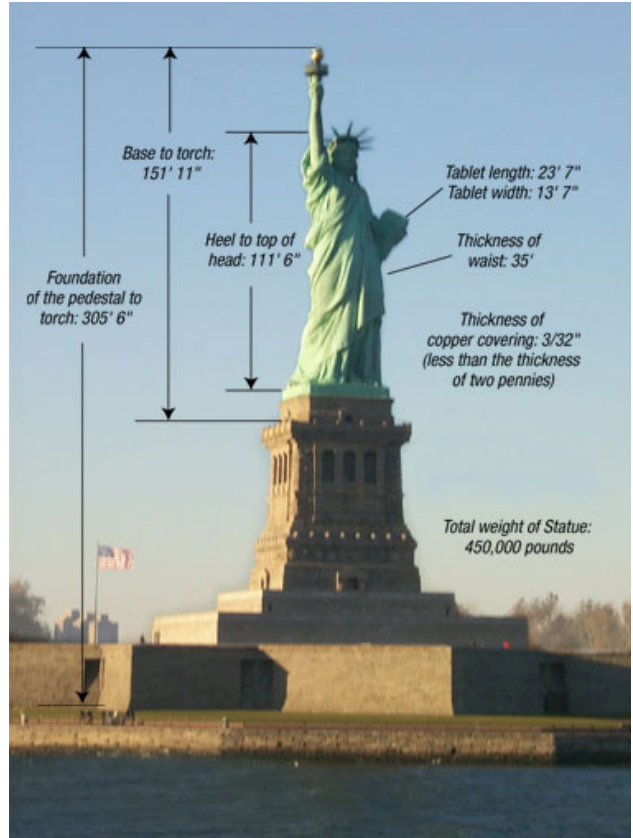
Feature	Measure
Height of copper statue	151 ft 1 in
Length of hand	16 ft 5 in
Index finger	8 ft 1 in
Circumference at second joint	3 ft 6 in
Head from chin to cranium	17 ft 3 in
Head thickness from ear to ear	10 ft 0 in
Distance across the eye	2 ft 6 in
Length of nose	4 ft 6 in
Right arm length	42 ft 0 in
Width of mouth	3 ft 0 in
Weight of copper used in statue	60,000 lbs
Weight of steel used in statue	250,000 lbs











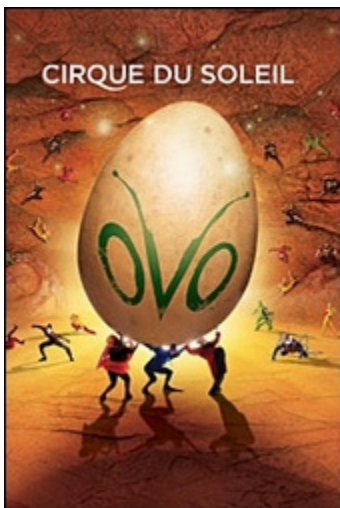
The entire experience - getting through security at the docks, riding the boat over to Liberty Island, getting our tickets and armband for crown access, going through a second security check to gain access to the pedestal, and climbing to the top and back (oh my god, the stairs!) took about four to five hours total; the majority of our free time in the afternoon. Once done, we met friend Rich Alford at Hard Rock Café in Times Square for a bite to eat before making our way to Randal's Island for OVO.



Getting there proved to be an adventure and a half.

Special MTA X80 event busses were scheduled to leave for Randall's Island from Lexington Avenue and East 125th Street, easily accessible via the Lexington Avenue 4/5/6 Subway and from the Metro North 125<sup>th</sup> Street Station. With busses running from at least 70 minutes before show time to 30 minutes following the performance, getting to and from the venue should have been a breeze. For the majority of our Passionates this was the case - Keith and Lucy led a contingent from the Hotel to the subway station where they all caught the busses at the same time; for Rich, Josh and I, because of our location at that time day, we were forced to choose a different route. And though we too tried the busses at Lexington and East 125th street, none of the appropriately labeled ones ever made stops near us, so we did the next best thing - hailed a cab! And strangely enough, we made it to Randall's Island only a few moments before the busses carrying our brethren - whodathunk?

By then we were all primed for the show.



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 story goes, "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."



And we enjoyed it!

Immediately following the performance Cirque du Soleil invited us to stay in our seats to meet a few of the creepy crawlies of OVO and get a chance to ask some of the cast and crew a few of our most burning and pressing questions. We were joined at the thrust of the stage by Lee John Brearley (Creaturea Manipulation artist), Michelle Matlock (who plays the "ladybug" character), and the Company Publicist.



It was a fantastic ending to a great day!



### **/// THURSDAY, APRIL 29<sup>TH</sup>**

The second day started just as early, but on a more personal note. Since our activities with Banana Shpeel wouldn't be until later in the afternoon, our early morning registration window wasn't opened until an hour before our activities; therefore, I had more free-time to explore the streets of Manhattan. That morning Rich, Josh and I had an appointment at 30 Rock, 30 Rockefeller Plaza that is - the home of NBC Studios in New York and the starting point for the NBC Studios tour. Since 1993, NBC has offered this historic tour that takes you through the halls and into the studios of NBC's New York operations. An NBC Page will be your guide to the world of the Peacock Network. Some NBC Pages have gone on to become famous entertainment personalities, including Willard Scott, Ted Koppel, Regis Philbin, Steve Allen, Marcy Carsey, Kate Jackson, Michael Eisner, and Dave Garroway.



Though our guide isn't destined to become an NBC star (nor did we see any such personalities on our tour), we had a good time touring the facilities.

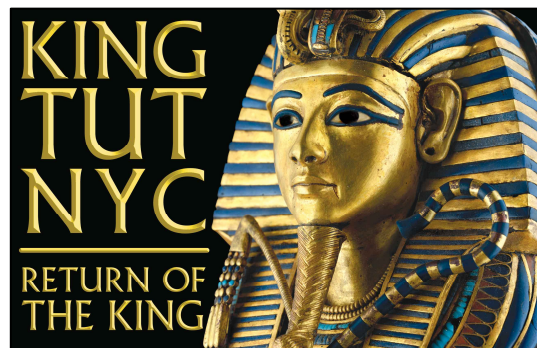


The first stop on the tour is the **NBC History Theatre**, where you learn about NBC's early days in radio. Your NBC Page will tell you about some of the network's early sound effect techniques and NBC's transition into television. Then Katie Couric and Matt Lauer (on video) take you down memory lane to show you where NBC has been and where the network is today. From there the Tour gives you a backstage peek at some of the most famous studios in television, including: Studio 3C - Home of NBC

Nightly News, Studio 3B - Home of Dateline, Studio 3K - Home of NBC Sports, and Studio 8H - Home of Saturday Night Live. And in addition to these, a stop at Broadcast Operations, the Make-Up Room, the set for Dr. Oz., and our very own chance to produce a news and weather program in the High Definition Mini-Control Studio. A visit to "The Top of the Rock" (a separate ticket) brought a fantastic end to our visit to NBC Studios.



Rich, Josh and I met a small contingent of Passionates (Rodolfo Elizondo, Steve Long, and Heather & Jim) for lunch at Juniors, a famous and award-winning restaurant most noted for its cheesecakes, and then I parted with the group to see the King Tut Exhibit at the Discovery Center, where 130 artifacts from Tut's reign were on display (some seen in America for the very first time!) in over 10 separate galleries. As a fan of Egypt and with a passing familiarity with Egyptology in general, spending even an hour here would be too hard to pass up.







We all re-assembled at ON THE AVE around 2:30pm for the open registration period, scheduled for those who might have arrived late and who still needed to pick up their convention credentials (a badge would be needed to attend the activities at Banana Shpeel, for instance), and to give Passionates a place to gather before-hand. ON THE AVE was chosen as our headquarters hotel this year because of its proximity to the Beacon Theater – it was just 300 yards south!



The experience was billed as being an invite from Mr. Schmelkey, of Schmelkey Productions, inviting the entire CirqueCon Group to come to his theater and witness last-minute rehearsals for his show BANANA SHPEEL before that night's performance. In doing so we'd also get a chance to speak with a member of the creative team. Watching a last minute rehearsal we did, but did you know we did it with Mr. Serge Roy, Director of Creation for the show? WOW!



He was as excited to speak about his new show as we were to sit and listen, but unfortunately we had to bid Monsieur Roy adieu an hour later - it was time for our Group Meal at Amsterdam Ale House. Billed as a charming neighborhood restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the Amsterdam Ale House is committed to serving the finest ales and lagers available. Not to mention a fine selection of foods one comes to expect from a great ale house. And at 76th Street and Amsterdam Avenue - it was just a couple of blocks from ON THE AVE, our Headquarters Hotel and from the Beacon Theater where we later assembled for BANANA SHPEEL following dinner; it was a great location!

And the food was good too...

At 8:00pm we settled in our seats for Cirque du Soleil's new twist on Vaudeville, BANANA SHPEEL.



Banana Shpeel, the latest show from producer extraordinaire Marty Schmelky, features a colorful array of slapstick comedy, eclectic dance and unique acrobatic acts. This larger-than-life personality presents the diverse talent he has gathered from around the world, as zany characters spread chaos throughout the theatre.

In his long and illustrious career, Schmelky has created such unforgettable hits as *The Phantom of the Banana*; *Annie Get Your Banana*; *Fiddler on the Banana*; *The Best Little Banana in Texas*; *Bring in da Noise*, *Bring in da Banana*; and *Gentlemen Prefer Bananas*. With *Banana Shpeel*, Schmelky is moving in a new

direction from his previous shows. "I'm mixing together lots of different ingredients in a big blender that will combine dance, comedy and circus arts in the fancy schmancy Beacon Theatre on the Upper West Side."

*Banana Shpeel* featured an international cast of 38 performers including the main character of Schmelky, played by Broadway veteran Danny Rutigliano, best known for his role as Timon in *The Lion King*. Assisting Schmelky are two slapstick sidekicks performed by Daniel Passer and Wayne Wilson and his wacky assistant Margaret played by Shereen Hickman. As Schmelky works to complete his latest show, he is disrupted by a comedic trio: Claudio Carneiro, Patrick de Valette and Gordon White. The show offers incredible acrobatic performances, including Russian hand balancer Dmitry Bulkin; Vietnamese hat juggler Tuan Le; Spanish foot juggler Vanessa Alvarez; Canadian Hand to Hand duo Preston Jamieson and Kesley Wiens; and Russian contortionists Tsybenova Ayagma, Tsydendambaeva Imin and Zhambalova Lilia. *Banana Shpeel* featured diverse dance elements, including brother-sister tap dance duo Joseph and Josette Wiggan and a talented ensemble comprised of Robyn Baltzer, Kassie Brown, Adrienne Jean Fisher, DeWitt Fleming Jr., Karida Griffith, Luke Hawkins, Kathleen Hennessey, Adrienne Reid, Anthony J. Russo, Melissa Schott, Josh Scribner, Alexis Sims and Steven T. Williams.



Banana Shpeel turned out to be a roller-coaster mix of styles that blended comedy with tap, hip hop, eccentric dance and slapstick, all linked by a hilarious narrative that ignited a succession of wacky adventures. It wasn't circus, or a musical or a variety show, or even vaudeville. It was Banana Shpeel, and it wasn't half bad!



\* \* \*

Our time in New York City ended with Banana Shpeel that night, but our CirqueCon adventure continued in Montréal, where he held another Meet & Greet, Group Meal, and Group Show. Much like for our CirqueCon 2005 event, we hosted our Montreal meet-and-greet from our hotel rooms at the Headquarters Hotel - Springhill Suites Vieux Port! And Passionates who joined us in Montréal for CirqueCon 2005 may remember the Restaurant du Vieux Port, a wonderful historical restaurant situated in the heart of the Old Port of Montréal and just a few moments walk to/from the Grand Chapiteau perched on the Quays at the waterfront. We loved them so much we went back!



And, of course, we saw Totem... (We'll get to that one in a moment).

As for BANANA SHPEEL, it unfortunately did not last its entire New York City run. The show originally had a run from February 25th through May 30th, with previews going from February 25th through March 22nd; however, production delays (following not-so-nice reviews in Chicago) pushed previews to April 29th through May 16th (we saw one of the first public preview shows). Normal shows would have then begun from May 17th through August 29th; however, scathing reviews and dwindling attendance forced the show to close at the Beacon on June 27th, two months after CirqueCon was in the house. BANANA SHPEEL didn't fare any better in its next stop - Toronto - folding there and for good on October 10th, 2010.

# Live to Cirque



APRIL 2010

## « Ome Yo Kanoubé »

TOTEM: Odyssey of the Human Species

Those of you who've met me know I am a champion for experiencing the premiere of a new Cirque du Soleil show amongst the hometown crowd. For fans of the Cirque, there's no substitute for being in the stands with a couple-thousand Québécois, clapping and stomping to the show's beat - whether it be lounge-fusion, organ-fusion, Indian-fusion, rock-fusion, insect-fusion or Native American-fusion - and having a grand time together. It's a magical experience you can get nowhere else but in Cirque's hometown.

My first experience with thus euphoria came in 2002 for Varekai, continued in 2005 for Corteo, 2007 for Koozâ and 2009 for OVO. And for the fifth premiere in a row now I've had the privilege of experiencing the awesomeness of premiere excitement with TOTEM.

But occasionally there's a miss-step.

Varekai, Corteo and Koozâ were well received by the hometown crowd (how about standing ovations DURING the performance?); OVO not so much. Corteo personally for me was not a particularly good premiere, especially after coming off that spectacular Russian Swings ending to Varekai, but the crowd enjoyed it. OVO fared much, much worse by both me and the crowd I saw it with; in fact, the response was so tepid I was sure Cirque had its first bona-fide flop on its hands!

Subsequent viewings of both Corteo and OVO (it seems the third time is always the charm) a little more than a year after premiere turned my view-point around though. So even if I find a show is a little too rough around the edges at premiere it's sure to engage me once it has time to stretch its legs, as it were.

So, how does TOTEM fare?

TOTEM = WOW + WTF all rolled into one neat package.

Using a number of materials currently available - press releases on staging, costuming, projection, and acts and characters - coupled with the show's program book and my own comments and opinions, I endeavor now to take you through what is the Odyssey of the Human Species: TOTEM.



\* \* \*

Like a magical cauldron bubbling, with scenes from the story of human evolution linked together in a chain, Cirque du Soleil's TOTEM (pronounced Toe-TEM) traces the fantastic journey of the human species from the beginnings of organic life, to its original amphibian state in Earth's primordial soup, to the foundations of science, to the realization of Man's dream of defying Earth's gravity and taking flight.



The themes of evolution and the search for balance are closely woven together throughout the show and illustrate - in a multidimensional visual and acrobatic language - the evolutionary journey of species, encompassing all of the potential we carry within ourselves. Creation myths from all walks of life act as a springboard for exploring the birth and evolution of Man - like an echo of the great questions of life - through various esoteric interpretations.

Somewhere between science and legend, they say, TOTEM is about life, exploring the ties that bind Man to other species, his dreams and his infinite potential. Thus, this show pays tribute to the infinite imagination of Man and the beauty of the world in balance between reason and excess.

TOTEM depicts a world peopled by archetypal characters, all of who witness and act out in their own way the perennial existential questions of life. Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons, primates and men in suits set out on their evolutionary quest for knowledge. This interpretation of evolution is the line that runs through the show. In the course of his journey, Man aspires to reach the stars.



Closely related to the notions of lineage and belonging to a group, the word TOTEM suggests that we all share the same roots, the idea of the order of species. We carry within our bodies the potential of all species, all the way to our desire to fly - like the thunderbird at the top of the totem pole. And in that way "Totemism" refers to the animal in Man. It contains the very idea of evolution; our bodies are living exemplars of it, because our species carry traces of all species. Is it coincidence that

this word, with the same spelling in many languages, sounds exactly like the Latin "Totum", which means "all" or "the whole?"

Say what? Yeah, that's the "WTF" part.

But it works, it really does.

The cast of TOTEM, comprising 52 performing artists from 19 countries, takes us through Cirque du Soleil's concept of "Totemism" from the edge of a reed lined-marshland on what appears at first glance to be nothing more than a quaint little island. But this island (the stage) is an organic visual environment that can become a spring, a swamp, a volcano, a lake, a lava flow, a mountain range, an ocean and even a star-filled sky all through the magic of projection (it has to be seen to be believed!)

The island upon which the show's characters inhabit evokes the shape of a giant turtle - an animal that, in many creation myths still prevalent in legends and oral traditions today (particularly in the Far East, Africa and North America), carries the weight of the world on its shoulder. The turtle is a symbol of stability, embodying the virtues of security, perseverance and self-confidence we nurture most. In nearly every ancient civilization the world over, the turtle has been a symbol of wisdom and longevity.

And thus it is a perfect stage upon which to showcase the tales of human evolution.

### **/// THE SHOW**

As TOTEM begins, life is brought to the primordial soups of the developing planet Earth, seeded by a dazzling ball of energy from the starry sky. Personified by "The Crystal Man", the show's poster character who symbolizes the universal force of life; he is the harbinger of said existence, sparking the evolution of Human life on Earth. His is a character tough to miss - his dazzling costume is literally covered in thousands of small mirrors and crystals (about 4,500 reflective components in all) to create that proverbial fireball that seeded our world, giving way to twelve acts and performances that exemplify the evolution of mankind.

#### **BARS (CARAPACE)**

In the opening scene, the lifeless dried-up turtle shell is whisked away to reveal the world of primordial beings, an effervescent community of amphibians and fish that live beneath its carapace. As a new world is revealed to them, they burst into play - launching themselves into a parallel bars/fast-track number reminiscent in many ways to Tournik from Corteo. With artists embodying frogs launching themselves into the air from the power-track and leaping from one bar to the next, they crisscross in mid-air with just inches to spare!

The acrobatic number is quite pleasing and technically adept; however, the artist's costumes here seem to steal the show for me. Their patterns and colors come from real fish and amphibian species found on



Earth today, including the most poisonous frog in the Amazon jungle, the Dart Frog. Textures of the fabrics are also a close match to the skin of these animals making the metamorphosis complete and a real eye catching experience from which to begin the show.

#### **HOOPS DANCER (PART 1)**

Using hoops to create static and dynamic shapes evoking various animal forms (such as a crocodile and a falcon) and other intrinsic images, an Amerindian artist performs a narrative ritual dance evoking the endless circle of life. Inspired by traditional ceremonial clothing of a number of North American Indian tribes (rather than an accurate portrayal of any one culture), the artist is able to incorporate all Native American tribes and then by extension the entirety of Humanity within that Circle of Life. Unfortunately his pleasing rhythmic dance is all too short; he'll make a return in the second-half of the show though.



#### **RINGS TRIO**

Bollywood-inspired music accompanies two men in this number as they compete against each other on two sets of gymnastic rings with the hopes of impressing a pretty woman lounging nearby with their sheer physical strength and superb physiques. That is until she shows them how it's done! Through a routine of pikes, flying dislocates, flanges and flying crosses typically found in a gymnastics competition, they take to the skies above the island, now a summer beach (complete with projected sand and waves), to showcase just how strong the Human body has become.



Of a number of "WTF" moments I had throughout the performance, this is the first "image" that immediately seemed completely out of place. The elaborate costuming and staging present through the show's reveal, the Bars and Hoops Dancer numbers, dropped so suddenly it was jarring. Although all three artists are capable and their talents are quite well received throughout the number, its "drop-in-like" placement and its lack of presentation make it one of the least pleasing routines in the entire show, in my opinion, of course.

#### **UNICYCLES AND BOWLS**



The abundance of autumn falls upon us next, represented by the warm browns of harvest. Five unicyclists come to the island to juggle metal bowls in an astounding display of agility, balance, synchronized control and physical grace. They toss the bowls with their feet - sometimes over their shoulders - and catch them on their heads without using their hands!



Details in the costumes of the five unicyclists help show this change. Although their stylized tutus transform them into flirty ballerinas, each unicyclist has her own look. The base costumes are printed in earth tones featuring seed pods, flowers, trees and leaves with small details sewn onto them, such as bolts, screws, feathers, and insects in an array of patterns to keep the spark of individualism.

#### **FOOT JUGGLING (CRYSTAL LADIES)**

Two Crystal Ladies emerge from the fiery bowels of the earth to evoke the creation of the world and the beauty of minerals. Wearing sparkling costumes that mirror the Crystal Man (each is adorned with 3,500 crystals and the two headdresses are each encrusted with a further 1,000), the artists spin squares of glittering material on their hands and feet before coming together to create a dazzling display of coordinated high-speed motion.



Foot juggling, like the unicyclists that came before, takes its cue from the Chinese circus. The discipline has been presented in past Cirque du Soleil creations, most notably in *Nouvelle Expérience* and *Dralion*, to great success; however, the presentation here is one of the most unique I have experienced by Cirque. A high-powered blue laser beam accompanies the performance, bouncing off the over 4,000 reflective surfaces of "The Crystal Man" (who hangs expectantly over the two ladies throughout their routine) and the ladies themselves as they juggle and toss their carpets from one to the other.

Although the routine is of very high caliber I found it impossible to get past the inclusion of the blue laser beam (it will be interesting to see if, for safety reasons, the beam is used throughout Europe and later the United States), or the eclectic design of their costume (especially that of the flat-topped headdress which only served to implant the image of Grace Jones firmly in my head.) Yeah, it was another "WTF" moment.

We get our real first good glimpse of the "Scorpion Bridge" during their routine. The "Scorpion Bridge," which serves as a mobile platform connecting the marsh to the scenes features variable geometry allowing it to adapt to each tableau. Built of steel and weighing 10,000 pounds, its eight powerful mineral oil hydraulic motors allow it to rise, descend, extend, retract and curl in on itself like a scorpion's tail (hence its name). Its reflective surfaces, which shine like mirrors, are made of stainless steel plates. It's truly an impressive piece of stage equipment.

#### **PERCHES**

An image of the evolution of man - from primates to Neanderthals to Cro-Magnons to modern man - comes to glorious life before it's suddenly thrown topsy-turvy. Ten businessmen trying to reach the highest peaks execute a number that requires extreme strength and flawless teamwork. The porters on the ground hold long metal perches while the agile acrobats climb almost to the cupola of the big top to spin, tumble and flip about trying fitfully to reach the heavens.

Personally speaking, for me this was one of the weakest numbers of the first half of the show. Much like the Rings Trio, where the skill does not come into question, it's the overall presentation that sorely lacks here. The costumes for each of the porters look as if they were gotten off a store clothing rack - a pair of plain black pants with a tiger-striped shirt. Really? Really, really (says donkey), and much like the Rings Trio costumes and scene, completely jarring.



#### **INTERMISSION**

#### **DEVIL STICKS**

The Tracker, an environmentally conscious friend of the animals, appears now as a virile toreador spinning his Devil Sticks to a sizzling flamenco-inspired beat. Although he's normally seen guiding "The Scientist" in his explorations of discovery, he becomes angered by the thoughtless, polluting actions of a clown and transforms before our eyes to enact a certain instinctive punishment, nature style.



Devil Sticks, for those unawares, are made up of three pieces - the baton and two control sticks. The baton is usually about 60-120 centimeters (2 to 4 feet) long and the control sticks generally 30-50 centimeters (or about 1 - 2 feet) long. One uses the control sticks to manipulate (or juggle) the baton and do so without dropping any of the pieces. It's an interesting, if only a juvenile equilibristic display.

## **FIXED TRAPEZE DUO**

Like two lovebirds, a young man and woman tease, play and sulk in an innocent game of seduction accompanied by the soft rolls of ocean waves. After spilling onto the island in an inflatable raft, they eventually intertwine their bodies in a lighthearted vertical dance of fresh, unusual movements and lifts using nothing but a trapeze bar, a hand, and their feet.

The presentation is simple, the music light, and the costuming fair, but the image and scene that follows is simply one of joy. Kudos to Cirque du Soleil for having the gumption to include a "not so serious act" minus the chickens (re: Corteo) that works on all levels of emotions. For me, this number is easily one the finest of the entire show in terms of content (the unicycle girls have to be the best overall).

A WOW moment.



## **MANIPULATION**

In this number: "The Scientist", a Darwineque explorer who tottles throughout the various scenes, returns to his advanced laboratory to begin experimenting on new theories he's discovered. He represents reason and the quest to understand the universe in ways that can be quantified, measured and put into tiny little boxes. As such his "laboratory" features an orchestra of glass containers filled with mysterious fluorescent fluids, a number of shiny bowls, and boxes beyond number. Aided by his assistants and a monkey, he steps into a transparent cone and dazzles us with his amazing physics experiments: manipulating bowls, folding boxes in on each other and juggling with luminous balls that might represent planets or molecules - or both - making them chase after each other in spiral orbits creating a maelstrom of molecules and celestial bodies.



It sounds awfully strange, doesn't it? And it is. But as strange as it sounds it does seem to work within the confines of the show's elements when taken as a whole. The only drawback I found was the nature in which the number was placed into the show - little to no explanation to his number's purpose - and the number's unabashed borrowing from the Blue Man Group. Otherwise, it's a mind-boggling presentation that will ensnare your senses!



## HOOPS DANCER (PART 2) & ROLLER SKATES

The "Scorpion Bridge" gets a workout after the Scientist departs, becoming the prow of a boat for our set of clowns, as they ski the open waters. The boat later rises to become a plane in flight, then finally a rocket taking off for the stars above.

Then, surrounded by members of numerous Human tribes, the Amerindian artist from earlier makes a gallant return to create new figures for us with his five hoop-rings. "Ney, nah-nah, ney-nah ney-nah" they chant, as the dancer concludes his routine with a globe that he raises high above his head.



The dancer is replaced by the soft sailing of a Native American canoe, traversing the high waters of a mountain stream. In a scene that evokes a wedding ceremony amongst the snow-filled mountains of winter, a pair of roller skaters spins and whirl at heart-stopping speeds atop a tiny platform - just 1.8 meters in diameter - shaped like a ceremonial drum.



Definitely a WOW moment.

## RUSSIAN BARS

Humanity has finally reached the stars, as The Cosmonauts show us upon taking the stage in the show's grand finale. Wearing colorful costumes inspired by the lost Mayan, Inca and Aztec civilizations of South America, ten artists perform feats of strength, balance and acrobatic movements on the Russian Bar. The jumpers are launched into the air and fly weightlessly across the sky like cosmonauts, leaping from one bar to the next with astonishing agility in a thrilling evocation of Man's desire to escape the Earth's gravity and constantly go above and beyond their design.



Walking on stage like a group of soldiers, I couldn't help but think of them as Lego Space Men with their helmets illuminated and their costumes glowing in the black light. In fact, the Cosmonauts (aptly named) are wearing two costumes in one: when they first appear (under black light) their body-hugging Lycra suits glow dramatically but as soon as the stage lights kick in, their look is completely transformed.

Some wear printed motifs that recall Mayan drawings and each of the artists is wearing an individual variation on that theme. The costuming is definitely not something you'd expect - I certainly didn't - but it does fit within the confines of the number's presentation. And in case you weren't sure the performance was taking place on the moon: a lunarscape is projected on the "island" and a rising Earth and star-field projected behind them.

The performance here, while definitely taking on that WOW factor (the skill of the artists are unmatched; most of them are Russian Bar alums from Alegría), it also earns a WTF (for the costumes). What exactly were they thinking?

The show ends on a very high note, culminating with a fantastic dance number featuring all of the cast and characters. I've come to understand the choreography is actually a Native American dance performed to call forth the positive energies that surround the dancer. It works because you'll definitely clap and sing along!



Ladies and Gentlemen, my review of TOTEM is by no means comprehensive. I've focused mainly upon the show's theme, some of its costuming, but most importantly its acrobatic numbers. I've not yet even touched on the show's music (which is fantastic, btw) or most of the clowning (which, sad as it is to say, was forgettable to me). As such I urge you to see the show in Montréal or Quebec City before it crosses the ocean and traverses Europe to gain your own opinion. TOTEM is a strange mixture of WOW + WTF but it's one hell of a ride through human evolution I can't wait to take again!





AUGUST+ 2010

## « A Blue Suede Disaster »

Thoughts on “Viva Elvis”

It seems I may have to eat my own words.

A few weeks back I took it upon myself to spend a few moments examining the evolution of Cirque du Soleil and relayed my thoughts to anyone who would listen... okay, who am I kidding - I went on a brief tirade... based on the reactions of some long-time fans who decided to “turn their backs” on the company following the debut of TOTEM (yet another touring show), of BANANA SHPEEL in New York City (and its subsequent flop), and the announced collaboration with Michael Jackson (another music-based show). The reason for the dissent was, of course, because Cirque du Soleil had stepped outside their creative core and was no longer the Cirque most remembered and enjoyed.

Although I spent a few moments then examining Cirque's evolution, came to terms with the knowledge that every company, just like every person, must continue to evolve to remain fresh and relevant, and that while I may feel saddened by the fact that I may never again experience the Cirque of old (a.k.a. the “Dragone Era”), I was not going to turn my back on the company - not just then. Why? If TOTEM and BANANA SHPEEL had taught me anything it was to expect the unexpected; to enjoy the shows for what they were not for what I wished them to be.

Sage advice from a long-time fan of Cirque du Soleil, wouldn't you say?

A lot has changed since I've written those words. Back then I hadn't seen VIVA ELVIS.

I have now.

Sorry Cirque, but after taking in the 7:00pm performance on Friday, August 20th, I have to borrow a few of Elvis' lyrics... I'll try not to be cruel but one night with you got me all shook up...

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog.

\* \* \*

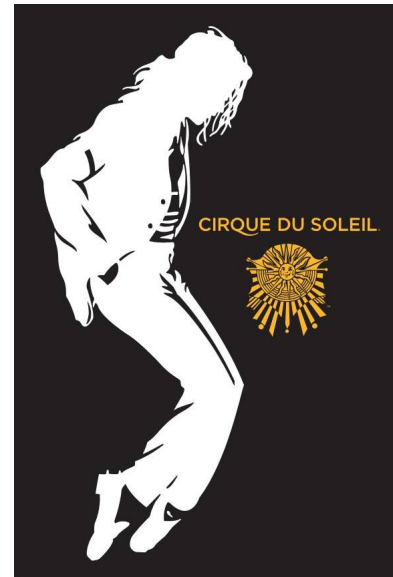


## /// THE EVOLUTION OF CIRQUE

We Cirque fans are a finicky bunch, aren't we?

We want everything just so.  
We follow their every move.  
We complain when they stray.  
What makes us so disgruntled?

When TOTEM was announced (and then the Michael Jackson collaboration) I joined in on the discussion briefly at Cirque Tribune, posting a few comments about the two concepts and about Cirque in general. On the board, most agreed that TOTEM was a departure from Cirque du Soleil's latest offerings and looked upon the show as a "savior" of the original avant-garde concept; however, the announcement of the Michael Jackson shows created more than a platform for further disagreements, it created a whirlwind of dissent - fans of many years were preparing to "turn their backs" on Cirque du Soleil over the announcement.



Why?

The answer in short: Cirque du Soleil was no longer the perceived Cirque they remembered and enjoyed. Watching the company evolve from an avant-garde circus troupe, staging esoteric shows in mysterious worlds, into a full-fledged entertainment company where avant-garde circus was but just one aspect of their business, was just too much to bear.

The decisions of those brave few made me examine my own level of commitment and in doing so I learned a little bit about myself, my expectations of Cirque and their ever-evolving company. Although my thoughts on the subject are obvious, permit me to share these jumbled thoughts with you.

First and foremost, what we as Cirque fans, just like fans of any property or universe (such as Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter, etc.), have to understand is that things constantly evolve. And that Cirque du Soleil has always been an evolving entertainment business.

Think of the many steps along the way: Nouvelle Experience, the first real transition between the ring and the theater; Saltimbanco, the change from dark to light; Mystère, the first resident show that angered many of the first few followers (how dare they discard the Grand Chapiteau?); Quidam, where Benoit Jutras took over musically; Dralion, a two-fold evolution with the departure of Dragone AND a purchase-for-play show; with Zumanity, the first "other side" of Cirque du Soleil; Delirium, the concert and arena show; LOVE, the musical; Wintuk; the seasonal; and BELIEVE, the train-wreck.

Cirque has lost fans and followers at each step.

As we've seen with Cirque recently, they're pursuing different avenues of entertainment - from eroticism (Zumanity), to a moving motion picture (KÅ), to a musical extravaganza (LOVE, VIVA ELVIS, MJ), to Vaudeville/Variety (Solstrom, Banana Shpeel) while also attempting to keep the status quo (Koozå, ZED, ZAIA, Ovo, Totem). They're branching out beyond what we as fans would consider their creative core. Strangely enough, though, they've been doing it for quite some time now.

One could argue they're not doing a good job at that. I personally don't mind Cirque branching out into unknown territory (in fact, I welcome it). Don't churn out a show just for the sake of it - take the time to do it right. And above all, be different! We've all often wondered where Cirque du Soleil was heading. Now we know - for better or worse, Cirque du Soleil has moved on from "the Dragone Era" into new forms of entertainment and there's no stopping them.

I am probably one of the few who love Koozå (because I understand the type of show it represents) and one of the few who feels OVO and SHPEEL have a chance if-and-only-if they can pull it together. I'll see shortly. But, yes, I too can see the difference in production value between a Quidam and an OVO, between Mystère and ZAIA, or between Saltimbanco (which still has it after all these years) and a Wintuk. And although I hold my reservations about the MJ show (I enjoy MJ's music and adore LOVE so I'm curious about it and ELVIS), even I realize Cirque today is not Cirque from yesterday.

Most of what sets shows during the "Dragone era" apart from those created today is the attention to detail. Most of what you see out of Saltimbanco, Mystère, Alegría, Quidam, "O" and La Nouba are tightly wrapped shows. They've benefited from the same creative team. They've also benefited from one person's vision, which is then allowed to be upgraded and spilt over from one show to the next. If Saltimbanco is a "happy" show, then Alegría is "sad". And if Alegría is "sad", Quidam is "angry" and "scared" all at once. Furthermore, if Alegría shows us how refined Cirque became, Quidam shows an emotional de-evolution, wearing its emotions on its sleeve. (Recall even Cirque du Soleil got flack about Quidam when it first premiered).

What we normally see out of these shows is an all-encompassing theme that has great depth, a thematical element that isn't obvious. To me that is what Cirque is missing today. Even with shows like Varekai or Corteo, which actually do better to adhere to the "Dragone" standard (IMO, Corteo over Varekai), their themes are still more recognizable.

If you're not sure... explain what Mystère, Alegría, or Quidam are about beyond what you see on its surface... then explain what Varekai, Corteo, Koozå and OVO are about and you'll get what I mean. Koozå is a great show. OVO is too. But they exist only within the confines of their own production. The earlier shows had a more esoteric quality to them, existing beyond the theater or the Grand Chapiteau in a way that's hard to explain. Perhaps it's just personal bias.

I understand that every company, just like every person, must evolve, but I am allowed not to particularly like what it has evolved into. Just like many folks no longer care what Disney has evolved into, or Apple, or Google, or any company.

I feel saddened by the fact that I may never again experience the Cirque of old. And for some that's too much to bear.

Maybe one day Cirque du Soleil will come to the understanding that it is over-reaching and will contract. Perhaps one day they'll say "wouldn't it be great if one group of creators could create all our shows", making each one (and the next) just that much better.

Even if that wish should never come true, I'm still in it for the long haul.

I'm not planning to "turn my back" on Cirque... not just yet. Although my feelings for Cirque du Soleil and my level of involvement in the fandom change constantly - the announcement of yet another LOVE clone doesn't help matters - I am curious about Hollywood 2011, Radio City 2011, and VIVA ELVIS (which has premiered but I've not yet seen); I wonder what's up with Dubai, Shanghai, and the Arena shows; and whether or not another touring show is on the horizon... and see what the future holds.

In the end I may find that I only like one aspect of what Cirque du Soleil has become (such as touring shows and resident shows like ZED) and perhaps that will do. For dozens of others, it's just the last straw. Can't say I blame them.

But if TOTEM and BANANA SHPEEL have taught me anything, it is to expect the unexpected and to just enjoy the shows for what they are, not for what you wish they would be.

### /// THE VENUE



Though I had said those words, Nicole and I were still very much looking forward to our time in Las Vegas. It is America's play ground, after all, and it's one of the few destinations in the country that we both dearly love. The reasons why are hard to quantify, really. Las Vegas just has that special something, an aura that we both revel in and enjoy to the fullest. Perhaps it's because everyone there is out trying to have a good time. Perhaps it's because it's something we don't get to see and do every

day. Perhaps it's because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Or, perhaps it's just because it's the one place on Earth that we as Cirque du Soleil fans can see seven Cirque du Soleil productions in one place. Although we'd both agree that Cirque has reached the saturation point - and we really only interested in five of the seven - the allure alone is hard to ignore. And besides, there's always something new to see and do in Vegas. And for our time out this round, it was MGM's new CityCenter project.





Though CityCenter was foremost on our minds, we wanted to explore the new offerings on the Strip in due course. We had a grand time strolling along the Canal Shoppes at the Venetian (and at Madame Tussauds Wax Museum), walked through the impressive casino and trappings of The Wynn, enjoyed the Botanical Gardens of The Bellagio (not to mention the pancake breakfasts at Café Bellagio, YUM!), had our picture taken with "Lucky" the lion cub at the Lion Habitat over at the MGM Grand (he was a big cub!), had a number of a BLT spiked milkshakes at BLT Mirage, traveled through the lush greens and blue seas at the Mandalay Bay Shark Reef, wandered through the Pyramid and Castle (Krispy Kreme!), saw our favorite tune played on the Fountains at Bellagio ("Con te partirò"), and rumbled through more than one performance of the new Volcano at our hotel - the Mirage - amongst other things.



But CityCenter took the cake.

CityCenter is a massive 16,797,000-square-foot (1,560,500 m<sup>2</sup>) mixed-use, urban complex on 76 acres (31 ha) located on the Las Vegas Strip. The project was started by MGM Mirage in 2006 and is still under construction today. Though much of the original plan has been altered since conception, what exists of the CityCenter today still contains approximately 2,400 condominium and condo-hotel units and approximately 4,800 hotel rooms, distributed within several high-rise towers around The Crystals, an ultra high-end retail and entertainment district.



CityCenter is designed to have all the commodities for daily life, featuring a 4,004-room hotel and casino - ARIA, standing 600 feet (180 meters) high, containing 61 floors and a 150,000 square-feet (14,000 m<sup>2</sup>) casino floor); a 392-room/225-condo boutique hotel - MANDARIN ORIENTAL, standing 539 feet (164 meters) with 56 floors; a purely residential offering - VEER TOWERS, twin towers leaning in opposite directions (4.6 degrees from the center), standing 433 feet (132 meters) high, with 674 condo rooms on 37 floors; a condo-hotel - VDARA, standing 578 feet (176 meters) high, with 1,495 rooms on 57 floors; and a 500,000 sq ft (46,000 m<sup>2</sup>) retail and entertainment district - THE CRYSTALS - which was intended to house the first grocery store directly on the Strip (though it currently does not).

With a total cost of approximately \$9.2 billion, CityCenter is the largest privately financed development in the United States to date. The original cost estimate was \$4 billion, but it was pushed up by rising construction costs and design changes. Vdara, Aria, Mandarin Oriental, and The Crystals opened in December 2009. Construction on the Veer Towers and the Harmon Hotel was expected to be completed in 2010, but further delays and other unforeseen circumstances (shoddy construction work at THE HARMON TOWER) have delayed the completion of the space.

Even so the entire complex is massive; a little too massive in my opinion. We did enjoy the Chihuly glass exhibit, though.





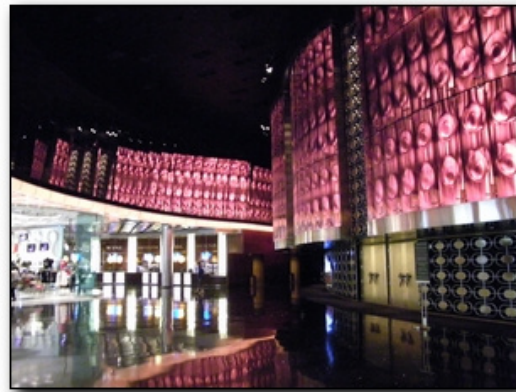
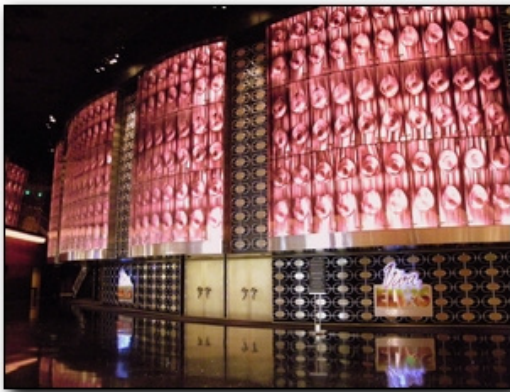






Within this monstrosity is the ARIA RESORT & CASINO. Aria consists of two curved glass and steel high-rise towers adjoined at the center. It opened on December 16, 2009; at 4,000,000 sq ft (370,000 m2) and 600 ft (180 m) in height, it is the largest and tallest structure at CityCenter. The resort's 61 and 51-story towers contain a AAA five diamond hotel with 4,004 guest rooms and suites, 16 restaurants, 10 bars and nightclubs, and a casino with 150,000 sq ft

(14,000 m2) of gaming space. It also has a 215,000 sq ft (20,000 m2) pool area with 50 cabanas, an 80,000 sq ft (7,400 m2) salon and spa, a 300,000 sq ft (28,000 m2) convention center and a 1,800-seat theater, which currently hosts Viva Elvis by Cirque du Soleil.



### **/// THOUGHTS ON THE SHOW**

Viva ELVIS is billed as a harmonious fusion of dance, acrobatics and live music; a tribute to the life and music of Elvis Presley. Nostalgia, modernity and raw emotion provide the backdrop for his immortal voice and the exhilaration and beauty of his music.

Created in the image of The King of Rock 'n' Roll - powerful, sexy, whimsical, truly unique and larger than life - the show highlights an American icon who transformed popular music and whose image embodies the freedom, excitement and turbulence of his era.

Significant moments in his life - intimate, playful and grandiose - blend with the timeless songs that remain as relevant today as when they first hit the top of the charts. Viva ELVIS focuses on the essential humanity of the one superstar whose name will forever be linked with the history of Las Vegas and the entire world of entertainment - Elvis Presley - in a number of show scenes. ((Check out our companion - « Artisans de L'Imaginaire: 30 Ans du Cirque du Soleil » - for more information on VIVA ELVIS).

One of the things that struck me from the moment we ascended the escalator to the theater's lobby was its design and color. The predominant color of the whole set and theatre is gold in a reference to the baroque era as well as to Elvis' own identification with gold as the universal symbol for the wealth of kings, and as a stylized reference to all of his gold records. In fact, the curtain and the stage floor are decorated with golden disks that recall the 151 Elvis Presley albums, singles and EPs that went gold, platinum or multi-platinum in the USA. It's an interesting color choice and looks somewhat tacky - both in the theater and out in the lobby. It felt cold, uninviting, which transferred once we got into the theater and found our seats.



One of the early disappointments I had regarding the show was the lack of Elvis's music.

"But wait a minute," you say. "Isn't this Elvis's show?"

Well yes, and no.

What I was hoping for was something akin to THE BEATLES LOVE just down the street at The Mirage: a complete integration of inspirational or thought-provoking (a.k.a. psychedelic in the case of The Beatles) scenes that cleverly tied the landscape shown to us together with the band's (or Elvis himself in this case) iconic music.

I didn't think we'd be getting an entire live band...

In THE BEATLES LOVE, it's the Beatles' own music you hear piped across the multitude of speakers, only remixed slightly; in VIVA ELVIS, a live-band plays his music while a female singer (wait, not ELVIS?) belts out his tunes. Occasionally a track of Elvis' vocals will accompany the singer, but it's just not enough in our humble opinions.

We came to hear ELVIS!

Another "problem" I noticed was the show's scale.

Although blurring the lines between scenery elements, acrobatic equipment and props in the show was a deliberate choice by designer Mark Fisher, it's too much in our opinion.

The design of the Elvis Theater has a conventional proscenium layout reminiscent of an opera house. The stage is wide and the backstage area and wings are vast. They have to accommodate the large-scale set elements and the need for speed in changing scenes imposed by the rapid pace of the show. The sides and the rear of the stage are fixed areas while the center is composed of 16 platforms, separated into 12 sections, which can rise to a height of ten feet.

Depending on the scene, the platforms may at various times in the show support performers, singers, dancers or set elements. The widest platform measures 18 feet by 80 feet and is raised by four powerful motors 26 feet below the stage.

It's humongous; most of the time the performers, singers, and musicians on it become lost in it or in what is going on around them. A good example of this comes in the show's trampoline piece - GOT A LOT OF LIVIN' TO DO - the trampoline/wall piece covers the entirety of the stage and yet only 5 people perform on it (the press-release says seven, but I only got five in my performance). It swallowed the performers whole! There's also just not much to the number. After numerous Fast-Tracks, Power-Tracks, and Trampoline-Walls presented in other Cirque du Soleil shows, I expected much, much more than jumping and diving between the sections.

It didn't deliver.

In fact, I was instantly reminded of OVO's Trampo-Wall routine - epic in scale (for a touring show) just grossly under skilled.

Another strong example occurred during the show's chair-balancing skit - BOSSA NOVA. Here a young man builds a tower of eight chairs then does a hand-stand when he's done. Trouble was: I didn't even know the act was progressing until about half-way through! The visuals on the ever-moving LCD screens kept my attention firmly affixed on them rather than on what was actually occurring on stage.

This is a huge mistake, in my opinion. The screens should help enhance the mood (like they do in THE BEATLES LOVE) not become the main attractions themselves.

Furthermore, although I enjoyed the way the number was presented (the song married quite nicely to the action on stage), having seen balancing-on-chairs in a variety of forms (notably in Nouvelle Experience, La Nouba and Koozå), was it necessary to present another iteration of the number? And if so, wouldn't it have been more prudent to increase the skill set? It was a plain old chair balancing routine...

Talk about a heartbreak hotel...

And don't get me started on JAILHOUSE ROCK - who thought it would be a good idea to fill the entire stage with a jailhouse set piece then just march back and forth across it for minutes on end? Sure, the upside-down bit was interesting but in the end just showed there wasn't much to do. Or ONE NIGHT WITH YOU - where a huge guitar piece descends from the rafters and two performers... climb over and around it? What? Where's the performance? Where's the Cirque? So wasteful. Or WESTERN SCENE - gun twirling and lassos... seriously? If I hadn't seen lassos in ZED I would have laughed this number right off the stage -- wait, I did... in ZED there was actually some presentation and mystique to it.

And what's with the force-perspective statues of Elvis?



Be that as it may there was one bright spot in the show for me - RETURN TO SENDER - a skillful gymnastics routine performed on high-bars set against an American Flag of boxer shorts. It had the skill, the whimsy and best of all, ELVIS himself singing his own song.

It just wasn't enough to save the show.

\* \* \*

In conclusion, I have nothing but the utmost respect for all the performers, musicians, stage personnel and creators that poured their heart and soul into bringing VIVA ELVIS to fruition.

The talent is there; unfortunately it's just underutilized.

In the end VIVA ELVIS is not my cup of tea.

And much like ZUMANITY, it's another side of Cirque du Soleil that I just can't quite appreciate. No, I take that back. I can appreciate ZUMANITY for what it is (it's just not the highlight of any trip to Las Vegas), and TOTEM and BANANA SHPEEL for what they try to be. I'm just not sure I can extend that thought to VIVA ELVIS.

I didn't enjoy it. I couldn't even take my own advice and enjoy it for what it was trying to be.

For the first time in a long time I was bored.

(KÀ's performance the previous night notwithstanding - but that's a story for another time - thankfully Blue Man Group, and a tall "Here Comes the Sun" saved our night!)

I'm returning this one to sender; I have no plans to see VIVA ELVIS again.

So I'll eat my words now and be on my way.

I am still curious about IRIS (at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood, California), ZARKANA (at Radio City Music Hall in New York City, New York), and the-as-yet-named show in Dubai (if that show ever sees the light of day); and, of course, what new touring productions may come out of Montreal in the near future. But my thoughts now can be summed up by the immortal words of Marlin the Fish from Disney/Pixar's "Finding Nemo":

"Good feelings gone."

I am much more skeptical now. I have a suspicious mind.

I guess for now I'll just keep swimming, just keep swimming...



JUNE 2011

## « ZARKANA: An Odd Escape »

Cirque at Radio City Music Hall

On Sunday, June 26, 2011, I took the opportunity to see one of the last few preview performances of Cirque du Soleil's new venue show - Zarkana - now taking up temporary residence at Radio City Music Hall in midtown Manhattan.

Joining me for this viewing were friends and fellow Cirque du Soleil fans Douglas Metzger, his wife Mary, and a small contingent of their friends and kids. We went in to our experience blind, meaning, little of the show's content (acts, music, and theme) was known to us; therefore, we hoped to reserve judgment of the show on its merits rather than prior expectations, though early reviews we'd caught before-hand were not promising.

But even keeping that in mind, Zarkana at times was a little hard to swallow.

Zarkana is one part acrobatics and one part rock opera with a penchant for the macabre (floating eyeballs that follow the action on stage, anyone?), which seems more attune to the early dark inklings of Criss Angel Believe than a classic acrobatic Cirque du Soleil show, as some pre-staging interviews led us to believe.

Although comparing and/or contrasting each new show to those who came before it isn't perhaps the best way to review a new production, as a fan of Cirque du Soleil for more than a decade, and one who has seen virtually every show the company has produced in one form or another, drawing conclusions and comparisons from past endeavors is, unfortunately, inescapable.

And though I welcome the new, the bizarre, the untried... the concept of macabre meets acrobatics here doesn't mix most of the time.

And generally speaking: there's too much atmosphere too little new skill.



## /// PLAYING IN NEW YORK

Cirque du Soleil's Zarkana may have been the impetus for making the journey to New York City, visiting great friends and seeing interesting sights is always on the bill. As a matter of fact, every time I make the trek to New York City I always end up doing something new - whether it be an attraction, a Broadway show, a restaurant experience, or similar outing. For example, on my previous trip (during CirqueCon 2010 in April/May 2010 to see "Banana Shpeel" and "OVO" in New York City and "Totem" in Montreal), I climbed to the top of the Statue of Liberty for the first time, ate Lombardi's pizza, and saw Blue Man Group in its original, small theater. Prior to that (during Celebri: YUL in April/May 2009), friends and fellow Cirque Fans Heather Smith and James Strain took us to a fantastic Tapas restaurant, drove us over the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, delighted us in the gastronomic finds in China Town and Little Italy, amongst other fantastic adventures. Before that there's my first Broadway performance of The Lion King, Cirque du Soleil's Wintuk at Madison Square Garden, and so on.

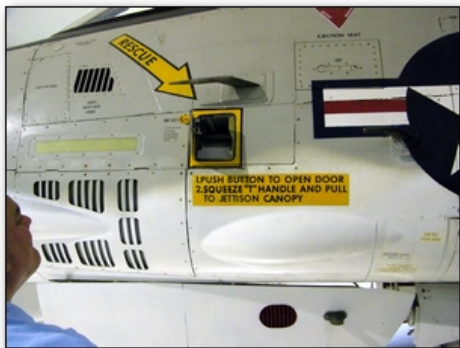
And this outing in New York would be no different, even if the constant showers rained on our parade, so to speak.

### The Cradle of Aviation

One of those new experiences was visiting the Cradle of Aviation, an aerospace museum located in East Garden City, Long Island New York built to commemorate Long Island's part in the history of aviation. To further along that theme, the museum is actually built on land that was once part of Mitchel Air Force Base, which together with nearby Roosevelt Field and other airfields on the Hempstead Plains, was the site of many historic flights. In fact, so many seminal flights occurred in this area that by the mid-1920s the cluster of airfields was already dubbed the "Cradle of Aviation," the origin of the museum's name.



The museum contains over 60 aircraft, scale models, artifacts and memorabilia from various time periods, which you can fully explore in a chronological order layout throughout the facility.





### The Dreams of Wings (1870-1903)

Ever since the beginnings of recorded history, humans have been pursued the dream of flight. Mankind's ancient dream to fly was finally realized with the first balloon flights in the late 18th century. During the 19th century, deliberate scientific experimentation with kites, gliders, airships and powered aircraft, ultimately led to the successful development of the airplane in the early years of the 20th century. Thus over the course of decades,

experimenters, some of them Long Islanders, solved the basic problems of an aircraft's shape, source of propulsion and means of control.



Here you'll find set ups of balloons, the Bell, Cody, Eddy, Hargrave, Lilienthal, Marconi, Timmons, and Wright Kites, as well as the Lilienthal Glider and Langley Aerodrome.

### The Hempstead Plains (1904-1913)

The first decade of flight after Kitty Hawk in many ways remains the most dramatic of all as brave men and women took to the air in shockingly fragile machines. By 1909 the first daring flights were made from the central area of Nassau County then known as the Hempstead Plains. Because the flat, open landscape made a natural airfield close to New York, the earliest aviators were drawn to the place. Thus aviation was first introduced to this area where it was to remain the focus of intense activity for the next 50 years. Here you'll find the Vin Fiz, Bleriot and Golden Flyer aircraft.



## World War I (1914-1918)

During World War One, Long Island became the home of some of the largest and most important military flying fields in America. The training of hundreds of military aviators would give shape to Long Island's aviation landscape for many years to come. The huge demand for military aircraft also made Long Island a significant center of research, testing and production - a focus that would grow through the following decades. The Curtis Jenny (a plane Charles Lindbergh barnstormed in), Morse Scout, Breese Penguin, Sperry Messenger, Aerial Torpedo and Ace Biplane aircraft can be found in this exhibit.



## The Golden Age (1919-1939)

It's during these two magnificent decades when flying truly came of age. Enormous technological progress was made that saw it go from being a dangerous sport to a prominent commercial business. Heroic pioneers of the sky made many historic flights to and from Long Island, but by far the most important event of the age was the epic flight of Charles Lindbergh, which revolutionized and popularized aviation like nothing else had before it. During this colorful era, Long Island became the center of the aviation world and its people contributed to the advance of aviation in every way possible, which you can see in this exhibit.

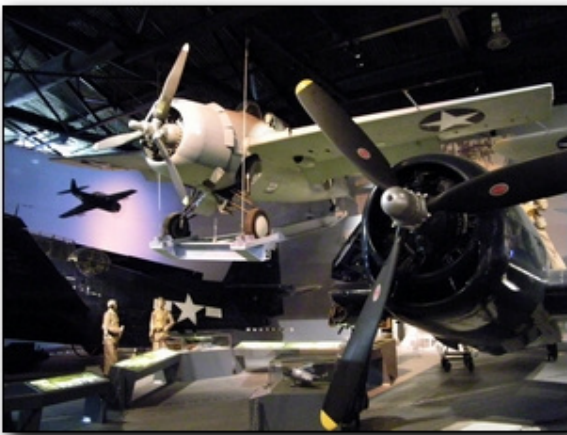


Here you'll find the Ryan NYP "Spirit of St. Louis" (This aircraft was built in 1928 by Ryan as a "Brougham", along identical lines as the "Spirit of St. Louis", in an attempt to sell the aircraft commercially. It is one of two surviving original "sister ships" of the "Spirit of St. Louis". This aircraft was also used in the 1955 movie "The Spirit of St. Louis" and was once flown by Lindbergh), the Brunner-Winkle Bird, a Grumman Goose, a Peel Glider Boat, a Savoia Marchetti S-56 and the Grumman F3F-2.

## World War II (1940-1945)

During World War Two Long Island was a crucial center of military aircraft production. These aircraft, produced in huge numbers for the Army, Navy and foreign governments, were of superior quality and had a major impact on the course of the war in all theatres. Local residents provided the manpower necessary for this massive production, and women and minorities were integrated into the workforce in large numbers for the first time. The war also had an impact on Long Island in terms of a large military presence, civilian defense and the conditions the war imposed at home.

On display here are a Republic P-47N Thunderbolt, Grumman TBM-3E Avenger, Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat, Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat and a Waco CG-4A Glider.



## The Jet Age (1946-1995)



The end of World War Two brought change to the local defense industry which attempted to diversify into several new fields. The birth of the post-war jet age also saw rapid population growth in Nassau County that forced the closing of several historic airfields. At the same time commercial airports on Long Island expanded greatly. New technology arisen that revolutionized aviation including jet aircraft, helicopters, and the Atomic Bomb.



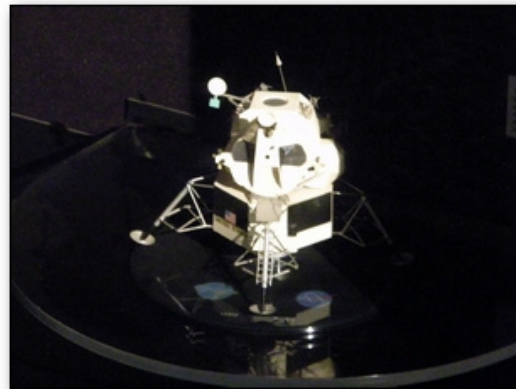
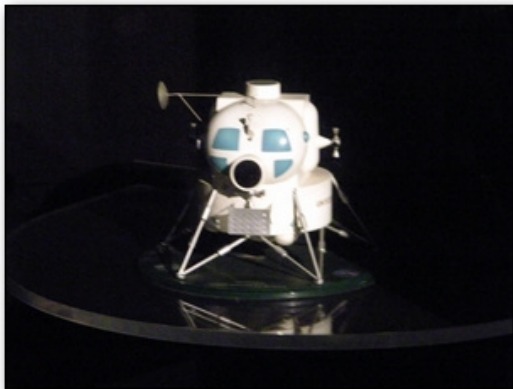
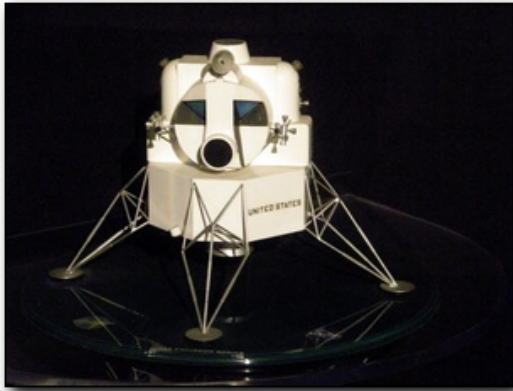
Grumman and Republic produced powerful new military aircraft during this "Cold War Era" that saw combat in three wars - and still serve today. The aircraft you'll find part of this section are: a Republic T-46 NGT, Commonwealth Skyraider, a Grumman Kitten, Republic RC-3 Seabee, Gyrodyne QH-50C, Gyrodyne 2C, Convert-a-wings Quadrotron, a Republic P-84V Thunderjet, Republic F105-B Thunderchief, the Grumman F9F Cougar, Maxson AGM-12C Bullpup missile, Maxson AQM-37A Target Missile and a Grumman F-14A Tomcat.



pictures from each of the LM releases out of Bethpage and a number of artifacts related to the Lunar Module Program, including these major pieces:

But of the various exhibits on display here, the Space Age section was the most exciting for me; much of it in honor of Grumman's legacy - a Long Island native company out of Bethpage - for its part in our voyage from the Earth to the Moon. Besides six of the original models that Tom Kelley and his team created to build the Lunar Module (LM, which are featured in a montage in the HBO Series "From the Earth to the Moon"), the exhibit also contains all the signed





Rockwell Command Module 002 --- On January 20, 1966, Apollo Test 004 was launched with this CM on a Little Joe II rocket. For this test, the rocket started to tumble at an altitude of 24 miles, as planned, and the Escape system sensed trouble and fired its abort rocket, carry the CM away from danger. The CM was recovered normally by parachute ending in a hard landing in the desert. The test proved that the CM launch escape and land impact systems could protect the astronauts in an emergency.

Grumman Lunar Module Simulator --- This Lunar Module (LM) Mission Simulator, a large, complex device, was in operation at the Kennedy Space Center between 1968 and 1972. It was used by every Apollo astronaut to train for landing on the Moon prior to their mission. Only one was built, and, remarkably, it survived in good condition. This is a very historically significant artifact, one of the few key pieces remaining from the Apollo program.





Grumman LM-13 --- On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin became the first human beings to walk on a world that was not their own. It was Grumman Lunar Module LM-5 "Eagle" that got them there. In all, six LM's successfully landed 12 men on the Moon between 1969 and 1972. The LM was a two-stage vehicle, Ascent and Descent, and both stages were covered with gold, silver and black thermal shielding which gave the spacecraft a fragile appearance. The LM was the first true spacecraft, performing its mission only in the vacuum of space, thus no aerodynamic qualities were needed. It was also built of extremely light thin metal, as the heavier it was the more fuel it would have to burn while looking for a safe landing spot. This original Lunar Module, LM-13, was intended for the Apollo 18 mission to Copernicus Crater in 1973, which was ultimately cancelled. (This particular model was completed and used during HBO's 1998 mini-series From the Earth to the Moon - awesome!)



Lunar Module LTA-1 --- Grumman built Lunar Module Test Article LTA-1 in 1963 after winning the LM contract. It was purposefully not completed to allow the engineers a chance to get at the inner workings of the module, see how it would be put together, and see how each part would work in conjunction with the other. Other test articles came as the LM program took shape. One thing to note here is that this particular test article has the round egress hatch, which was later thrown out for a square one.

Amazing stuff!





### /// USS INTREPID & MARS 2112

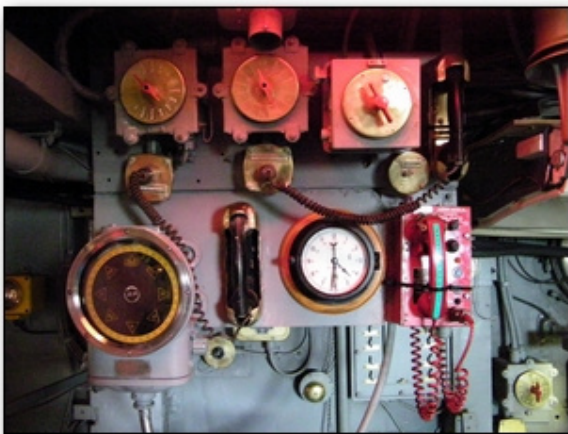
DO NOT TOUCH

This, when seen by my friend Doug Metzger, means the exact opposite, and sometimes it gets him into a lot of trouble, as it did on the deck of the USS Intrepid, a World-War II era aircraft carrier docked on the shores of Manhattan as a museum to the United States' sea, air and space ventures. What did he do? He pulled down on a lever that made a loud *BOOM* against a rather heavy iron door. He didn't break anything, but he captured the attention of a number of the museum's staff members who promptly asked him to leave the premises. Oh Doug, what are we to do with you?

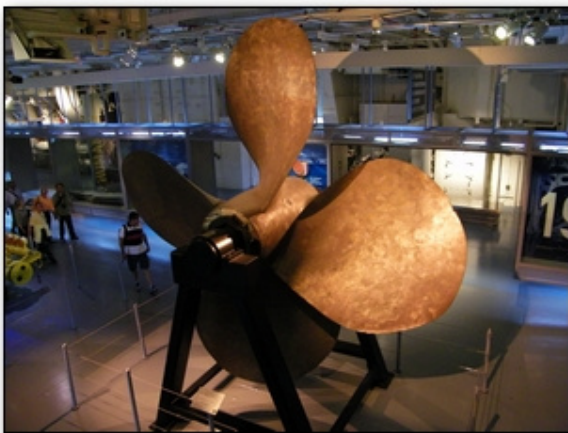
The USS Intrepid (CV-11), an aircraft carrier launched 26 April 1943 and decommissioned 15 March 1974, opened as a museum in New York City during August 1982 and is designated as a National Historic Landmark today Located at Pier 86 at 46th Street on the West Side of Manhattan, the museum showcases the World War II aircraft carrier USS Intrepid (CV-11), the submarine USS Growler, a Concorde SST and a Lockheed A-12 supersonic reconnaissance plane. It is amongst one of the best museums in New York City and a must-see for sea, air and space enthusiast!



See a number of naval and marine planes on the air craft carrier's Flight Deck, go above ground into the tower and see the bridge where all the action used to take place, and go into the bowels of the ship to see how cramped the mess hall, sick bay and various other living quarters really were on the Third Deck, before ascending back to the Hanger Deck to learn about the ship at war (and peace) via film, and wander through the ship's other special exhibitions here on display.







And in the near future, the Intrepid will be the new home of ENTERPRISE, OV-101 - and from what I'm told the original cast of Star Trek will make an appearance to re-dedicate her, much like they did in 1979 when the ship rolled out.

How cool is that?



Equally as interesting, but perhaps not as intriguing as the Cradle of Aviation Museum (I am a nut for Space stuff), experiencing the sheer awesomeness of the Intrepid was still very cool indeed. And after spending the day at the Intrepid with Mary's brother and family, we hiked a mile through Chelsea to Mars 2112 for a bite to eat, one of the more... memorable restaurants we frequented - and not necessarily in a good way.

Mars 2112 is one of many tourist-targeted restaurants in the Times Square district of New York City, based on future space travel and accommodations. At 33,000 sq ft (3,100 m2), it was the largest such themed restaurant when it opened in November 1998. Businessman and founder Paschal M. Phelan claimed at its opening. "'It's the fusion of fun and good food and fantasy."

The restaurant is situated in a sunken courtyard in front of the Paramount Plaza building at Broadway and 51st Street. A UFO-like craft takes patrons to the dining tier, where the "Mars Bar" and "Space Arcade" are also located. Perhaps the most notable feature is Crystal Crater. Crystal Crater serves as the dining area. It is three stories high, and decorated to match a possible Mars subterranean landscape. Waiters are dressed in futuristic costumes, and food and drink items have space-themed names. After dining, patrons pass through two doorways where a "teleporter" takes them back to the main floor. Customers then enter the gift shop.



Ooooookay.

Thankfully, a follow-up dinner at Ellen's Stardust Diner and a previous one at Smokin' Al's, more than made up for this memorable stop at Mars 2112.

I wish, however, I could say the same about Zarkana itself.

### **/// THOUGHTS ON ZARKANA**

Zarkana is a visual vortex set in a slightly twisted musical and acrobatic fantasy universe where, little by little, chaos and craziness give way to festivity and love regained.

The story follows Zark, a magician who has lost his powers and the love of his life - in an abandoned theatre where he was successful several years earlier, finding the theater populated by a motley collection of off-the-wall characters and incomparable acrobats. His friends, the White Clowns, come out of hiding to try and help him put together a show, but nothing works the way he wants: His magic powers are out of control because Lia, Zark's assistant, is missing. Without her, there can be no magic - she is the love of his life!

But also within the theater are the Mutants, four sirens as sinister as they are fabulous - The Pickled Lady, Mandragora, Kundalini and Tarantula - and they are determined to seduce him, diverting him from his quest.

In the lyrical, fantastic world of Zarkana, the setting - an abandoned theatre - is a character in its own right. The walls breathe, move and sing. The main set elements consist of three sweeping arches - all sculpted by hand - representing three of the four mutants who try to divert the magician Zark from his quest.

The first arch represents Kundalini the Snake Lady, whose world is populated by dozens of slithering snakes. It's the largest of the three arches and is decorated with more than 150ft of hand painted resin "snakes" which started out as Styrofoam sculptures that were used to create molds for the liquid resin. The second arch, which also serves as a video screen, harbors Mandragora, a plant-like creature that comes to life with "arms" extending out like scissors nearly 100 feet. The third represents the Pickled Lady, a video-based creature with six arms who lives in a large pickle jar.



The overall aesthetics were inspired by the Art Nouveau movement of the last century, as well as the works of Gaudí and Klimt, while many of the organic shapes in the set elements are a nod to the master French glassmaker and jeweler René Lalique. Upon this setting a number of acrobatic feats are staged, they are: Juggling, Ladder Trio, Rope Duet, Flags, Russian Bar, High Wire, Cyr Wheel & Cerceaux in the first half; Sand Painting, Flying Trapeze, Wheel of Death, Hand Balancing, and Banquine in the second. (Check out our companion - « Artisans de L'Imaginaire: 30 Ans du Cirque du Soleil » - for more information on ZARKANA).

At this stage of the show's development, much of its first-half is rather weak acrobatically.

I personally enjoyed opening the show with the juggler, something simple; however, much of the routine is similar to other juggling acts I have seen inside and outside of Cirque du Soleil. There was nothing new presented here. And though the Flags piece was rather interesting in a Cirque setting, it might have been more appealing had it not given off a strong BLAST vibe. Even the Russian Bar routine (performed by a single female) was a nice diversion, but little in the way of innovation. To be quite honest the show actually held my attention until the tightrope number, the second-to-last act in the first-half.

During the set-up for this piece, the background became more projected than it had previously been (or I hadn't noticed much up to this point) and turned into a serpent's layer of sorts. The arches and columns of the inner proscenium turned into vestiges of snakes whilst rising from the middle of the stage, in an image I would have thought belonged in some other kind of Broadway production, the female singer... as a snake.

"Snake lady" then "serenades" us in the most whiny, god-awful screech whilst the guys of the tight-rope turn a rather lack-luster performance on the wire.

As a seasoned veteran of Cirque performances, I know it's hard to turn a more inspired performance than the boys from Kooza, but could you have at least made it look like you were enjoying yourself?

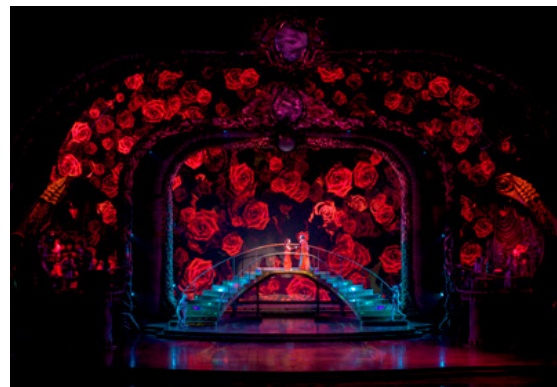


This particular number is a great example of the jarring mix that Zarkana is trying to project, in my opinion. Neither the act's staging nor its accompanying music made any sense to each other. The two contrasted harshly rather than being complimentary, which you desperately need in order to have a successful presentation. And because the act didn't seem to have it, the performers had nothing to work with - their

performance was out of tune (no pun intended and no thanks to the screeching wretch) with what was going on around them.

The mess that is the Tight Wire, the kind of WTF moment - that's Whisky Tango Foxtrot - that unfortunately bleeds over into the next number, a combination Cyr Wheel / Aerial hoops piece that is neither one or the other. The echo of the previous number still prevails here and it ruins what should be an explosive and triumphant ending to the first half of the show. Rather than keeping us spellbound for the restart of the show some twenty minutes later, we sat in confusion wondering what we were taking part in.

Its presentation, much like the ladder, rope and Russian bar didn't raise the bar - if you'll pardon the pun - of numbers Cirque has employed (and created) in the past. Meaning: it's nothing I haven't seen before, and better, in other shows. This leads me to another point I've harped on before - innovation. If you look over Cirque du Soleil's catalog, for the most part you'll find innovation in the acts it presents.



For example, the Russian Swing. The first time Cirque audiences were introduced to the apparatus was in 1992's Saltimbanco, a single-form piece with little degree of difficulty. We saw the apparatus again in 1998's "O" and not only did Cirque double the number of apparati, Cirque also included water rather than a firm stage. Cirque upped the ante in 2002's Varekai when performers not only tossed themselves into huge canvas screens but also tossed themselves from swing to swing.

But there is a silver lining here.



Much of the pain of the first half of Zarkana was washed away by the awesome performances of the Sand Painting, Flying Trapeze, and Banquine numbers (our performance didn't have Hand Balancing and Wheel of Death as presented here was lackluster compared to Kooza's), so the show did end on a high note, relatively speaking.

Otherwise, we've seen juggling of this caliber before, a ladder act (aka Corteo, and it's done much better there), a Spanish Rope duet (in Ovo, also done better there, and in Corteo), an anemic High Wire (good god, could these guys have any less stage presence and energy?), Cyr Wheel & Hoops (a mash-up of both disciplines at the same time that does neither justice, or anything new), and a single Russian Bar piece which is better than everything else in the first half of the show, but still lacking.



The clowns, to me, were not funny. And the music... it's just average.

There's nothing remarkable about it.

In the end I fear without a number of significant changes, retooling and hard decisions, Zarkana will go the way of Banana Shpeel in New York City - to the place where failed shows end up. Cirque du Soleil has a lot riding on this show's success, especially if it wants to capture the New York City market, but alas I don't feel present-day Zarkana has what it takes to capture New Yorker's imagination.

Or the fans.

With that said, if you're in New York City before the show's temporary-final curtain call, give Zarkana a chance. You may find it to your liking way more than I did and in reality that's all it takes. And even if you don't, check out the USS Intrepid and Cradle of Aviation Museums, they're cool. Have dinner at Ellen's Stardust Diner or Smokin' Al's, but do me a favor and don't take a trip to Mars, you'll thank me!



DECEMBER 2011

## « IRIS, A World of Cinema »

CirqueCon 2011: Hollywood! (And More...)

Two thousand and eleven has been a tough year for Cirque du Soleil and its productions world-wide, and an even harder one for a fan such as myself. with the announcements that ZED would close at the end of 2011 and VIVA ELVIS at the end of 2012 (at the urgency of MGM Resorts International), and rocky starts to their newest productions (ZARKANA in New York City, which I had previously reviewed... negatively; and MICHAEL JACKSON THE IMMORTAL WORLD TOUR, which I had planned to dissect but... I can't. I just found it too horrible), that only left IRIS, Cirque du Soleil's swaré in Hollywood to help save the year.

On Friday, December 2, 2011, I along with scores of other Cirque du Soleil Passionates descended upon the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, California for CirqueCon 2011, where many of us would see IRIS - Cirque du Soleil's newest resident/venue production - for the very first time. But IRIS wasn't the only event on the itinerary... I, along with friends Doug and Mary Metzger, arrived a little earlier than the scheduled weekend in order to catch a little whimsy at Disneyland and by seeing a little of the glitz, glitter and glam that is Hollywood.



### /// DECEMBER 1<sup>ST</sup> – ADVENTURES IN DISNEYLAND



Visiting Disneyland today marked the second time I've ever set foot on the resort. The last was back in 2006 when I spent a couple of days here before heading off to Las Vegas for CirqueCon 2006, so you can imagine it was quite the treat. Although we arrived a little later than I had wanted, it really didn't have much of an effect on our enjoyment of the park. Due to the weather (some damaging high winds the night before and power outages not to mention it being cold) a lot of people stayed away from the parks, so crowds were very, very light.

Most of the rides were walk-ons or no more than a ten minute wait - and we rode quite a lot of them: Walt Disney's Enchanted Tiki Room, Pirates of the Caribbean, the Haunted Mansion (in Nightmare Before Christmas Holiday layover), Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, the Disneyland Railroad (circling the park), and the Matterhorn Bobsleds.

### **The Matterhorn Affair**

It's the Matterhorn Bobsleds I wish to expound on more, though; Mary and I had quite the ride there.

Out of all of the attractions within Disneyland, the Matterhorn was at the top of my ride list. Mostly because this particular attraction has not been cloned at any of the Walt Disney World parks nor at any of the other parks world-wide. And because this ride was the one and only I could not experience the last time I was out - it was down for maintenance.

So when we came upon that part of the park I quickly steered us over. But with Emily having some tummy issues and Doug not interesting in riding, it was left to me and Mary (who was game) to hop on; thus we got in line and thought nothing of attempting to ride it together in the same car. That is until we both walked up to the vehicle and stepped in it.

Uuuh, there wasn't room for two adults in one car.



So picture me standing there in front of Mary both attempting to squeeze ourselves into this ride vehicle - because who are we kidding, were not the picture of fitness either of us - with our protests being ignored by the ride operators.

In fact I stood there looking right at one of the kids operating the ride telling him there was no way I was going to be able to sit down in the ride and all he did was press the button to move the vehicle forward. Let me say that again: I was standing up in the vehicle, not buckled in or securely seated behind the lap bar, while the vehicle was in motion. And furthermore, he didn't seem to care that I was that way - for all it seemed he cared about was moving the vehicle on.

Luckily the vehicle stopped again and that's when I decided that come hell or high water I had to sit down and get protected by the lap bar otherwise I'd be standing up through the entire ride! So down I went... squееееееееееzing my fat ass into the capsule in front of Mary... hanging on to the bar for dear life.



And for Mary's part, she had to put her hands on my back and push me forward just so I had something to brace against when the ride was in motion.

It was not comfortable. But it turned out to be fun.

As soon as we popped out of the vehicle (yes, it made a popping noise - okay, so no it didn't) we fell into hysterics. And we remained that way - partly laughing, partly crying, and partly stumbling - all the way from the exit queue over to the benches Doug and Emily were sitting upon. You should have seen their faces the moment the two of them saw us... and at first we wouldn't talk about it for our dignity was stripped from us in those two minutes!



For a few moments it became quite the inside joke but eventually we let Doug and Emily in on it. It was the most interesting ride of the day I tell you!

### California Adventure



By mid-day we left Disneyland Park for the one next door, California Adventure. I visited this park the last time I was here too so there wasn't much here I really wanted to see - except for their new night-time spectacular: World of Color. Since we still had a few hours until it would begin, we hit up a couple of attractions - Sorin' Over California first, then after meeting up with Chris Gullick and Todd Krause (fellow Cirque Passionates), we rode the new The Little

Mermaid: Ariel's Undersea Adventure, an animatronic ride through Aerial's undersea world, and then walked about until it was time for dinner.

I booked Wine Country Trattoria for 6:30pm, which came with a special VIP viewing area ticket for World of Color, but since the park was even more dead than Disneyland (and we were cold and a little hungry by that point) we tried to get in about an hour and a half early - and we did! The meal wasn't bad too and it was great sitting under the restaurant's heaters. Following dinner we wandered back out around the park, generally staying close to Paradise Pier, and decided to ride Mickey's Fun Wheel (Chris squeeeeee; he's afraid of heights and doesn't much like Ferris Wheels, but he did it) and shop about (did I mention it was cold? We needed more jackets!). Eventually it came time for World of Color... and I was geared up and ready.



## World of Color

World of Color is a nighttime show at Disney California Adventure Park, which cost cost US\$75,000,000 to design, manufacture and build. The process of assembling, installing, and testing the show's numerous components and equipment in Paradise Bay spanned a period of approximately 15 months. It premiered on Friday June 11, 2010 as part of "Summer Nightstastic!".



Designed by Walt Disney Creative Entertainment, under the direction of VP Parades & Spectaculars, Steve Davison, the show uses 1,200 fountains that can shoot water up to 200 feet (61 meters) into the air. Other water features include a 380-foot (120 m)-long mist screen on which images are projected (similar but smaller screens are used in Fantasmic! at Disneyland and Disney's Hollywood Studios at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena

Vista, Florida). Fire nozzles are capable of shooting flames up to 50 ft (15 m) in the air. Fog and lasers are used. Projection domes emerge from the water atop telescopic masts and feature lighting effects and video projected onto the inside surface of the domes. Mickey's Fun Wheel has its lights synchronized throughout the show and searchlights and other light towers rise from boxes bordering Paradise Bay to give the show an extra punch. Mark Hammond and Dave Hamilton arranged the music, which was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra.



Special animation sequences were created using paper animation by paper artist Megan Brain, who created many characters for the show. The music was recorded at Abbey Road Studios in London, England performed by over one hundred musicians by the London Symphony Orchestra. Australian Choreographer Joshua Horner created a unique interpretation of the music for the Disney Creative Entertainment team thus serving as another source of inspiration for the movement



of the water fountain sequences. The show presents footage from the Disney library, including films from; Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. The viewing area, known as Paradise Park, is situated along the northern shore of Paradise Bay, and can hold up to 4,000 spectators at full capacity. It is multi-tiered, similar to the viewing area for Fantasmic at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. It features trellises, flowers, and an interactive play fountain during the day. Hidden fountains located in the flower beds in the viewing area are incorporated into the stampede scene from The Lion King, as well as the finale.



It. Was. Totally. Awesome!

I wished I could see it again and again.

And from there we parted, making our way back to Hollywood and to bed.



## /// DECEMBER 2<sup>ND</sup> – HOLLYWOOD DREAMS

*Welcome to Hollywood! What's your Dream?*

Yeah, I cracked the same joke when I last was in Hollywood, what, five years ago? Movie buffs might recognize it as a line spoken by one the homeless men in the movie *Pretty Woman*. Be that as it may, it seems not much of it has changed... at least here at Hollywood & Highland.

This morning started off rather early for me; so I spent some time at the H&H Starbucks location getting caffeinated, then browsing the stars on the Walk of Fame up to the Chinese Theater whilst I waited for Doug, Mary and Emily to wake up.



Once 9:00am struck I made my way over to the Highland Gardens Hotel, CirqueCon's headquarters hotel for this event, to collect my CirqueCon badge and packet materials - I'd need the badge to get into the IRIS special activities at least and although I was sure I could do so without it, I wasn't going to take any chances. I met up with Doug and Mary there who had finally gotten up about that time. We stayed and chatted with Keith a bit before parting to start the rest of our day.

Which started with a walk down the Walk of Fame for a piece - from Hollywood & Highland to La Brea Avenue then back down the other side just past Highland, whereby we turned back around and headed back to the hotel for a bit. I would have liked to have wandered the full length of the Walk of Fame, but, getting accosted every 10 feet by peddlers pushing bus tours, the excitement of being there wore off.



So we decided upon our next journey - to the La Brea Tar Pits.

## The La Brea Tar Pits

The La Brea Tar Pits (or Rancho La Brea Tar Pits) are a cluster of tar pits around which Hancock Park was formed, situated within the Mexican land grant of Rancho La Brea, now a piece of urban Los Angeles, California, near the Miracle Mile district.



Tar pits are composed of heavy oil fractions called asphaltum or tar (brea in Spanish), which seeped from the earth as oil. In Hancock Park, crude oil seeps up along the 6th Street Fault from the Salt Lake Oil Field, which underlies much of the Fairfax District north of the park. The oil reaches the surface and forms pools at several locations in the park, becoming asphalt as the lighter fractions of the petroleum biodegrade. This seepage has been happening for tens of thousands of years. From time to time, the asphalt would form a deposit thick enough to trap animals, and the surface would be covered with layers of water, dust, and leaves. Animals would wander in to drink, become trapped, and eventually die. Predators would also enter to eat the trapped animals and become stuck.

The tar pits visible today are actually from human excavation. The lake pit was originally an asphalt mine. The other pits visible today were produced during the 1913-1915 excavations, when over 100 pits were excavated in search of large mammal bones. Various combinations of asphaltum and water have since filled in these holes. Normally, the asphalt appears in vents, hardening as it oozes out, to form stubby mounds. Methane gas also escapes, causing bubbles that make the asphalt appear to boil. This can be seen in several areas of the park as well.



As the bones of the dead animals sink into the asphalt, it soaks into them, turning them a dark-brown or black color. Lighter fractions of petroleum evaporate from the asphalt, leaving a more solid substance, which holds the bones. Apart from the dramatic fossils of large mammals, the asphalt also preserves very small "microfossils": wood and plant remnants, insects, mollusks, dust, seeds, leaves, and even pollen grains.

Radiometric dating of preserved wood and bones has given an age of 38,000 years for the oldest known material from the La Brea seeps. The pits still ensnare organisms today, and so, most of the pits are fenced off to keep humans and animals from getting caught and killed.

Contemporary excavations of the bones started in the early 20th century {1913-1915}. In the 1940s and 1950s, public excitement was generated by the preparation of previously recovered dramatic large mammal bones. Subsequent study demonstrated that the fossil vertebrate material was well preserved, with little evidence of bacterial degradation of bone protein. By the 1970s, research attention had shifted to smaller specimens, such as preserved insects and plant parts, including microfossils, such as pollen grains. These remains have contributed to an understanding of the Los Angeles basin during the glacial age, with a cooler and moister climate.



It was cool to see - on more than one occasion we saw a methane gas-infused geyser erupt out of the pits - but otherwise it was uneventful.

### Hollywood Sign

After taking a brief tour of the parklands, we packed up our troubles and decided on a wild ride to the top of the Santa Monica Mountains to see just how close we could get to the famous Hollywood Sign.



The Hollywood Sign is a landmark and American cultural icon in the Hollywood Hills area of Mount Lee, Santa Monica Mountains, in Los Angeles, California. The sign spells out the name of the area in 45-foot-tall (14 m) and 350-foot-long (110 m) white letters. From the ground, the contours of the hills give the sign its "wavy" appearance, as reflected in the Hollywood Video logo, for example. When observed at a comparable altitude, as in the photo shown here, the letters appear nearly level.

The sign was first erected in 1923 and originally read "HOLLYWOODLAND". Its purpose was to advertise the name of a new housing development in the hills above the Hollywood district of Los Angeles. H.J. Whitley had already used a sign to advertise his development Whitley Heights, which was located between Highland Avenue and Vine Avenue.



He suggested to his friend Harry Chandler, the owner of the Los Angeles Times newspaper, that the land syndicate in which he was involved make a similar sign to advertise their land. Real estate developers Woodruff and Shoults called their development "Hollywoodland" and advertised it as a "superb environment without excessive cost on the Hollywood side of the hills".

They contracted the Crescent Sign Company to erect thirteen letters on the hillside, each facing south. The sign company owner, Thomas Fisk Goff (1890-1984) designed the sign. Each letter of the sign was 30 feet (9.1 m) wide and 50 feet (15 m) high, and the whole sign was studded with some 4,000 light bulbs. The sign was officially dedicated on July 13, 1923. It was not intended to be permanent. Bay Cal Painting, a restoration company, says on its website that the expected life was to be about a year and a half, but after the rise of the American cinema in Los Angeles it became an internationally recognized symbol, and was left there.



In September 1932 the body of Broadway actress Peg Entwistle was found in a ravine below the sign. She had been living at her uncle's house in Beachwood Canyon. A suicide note was found in a purse anonymously dropped off at the Hollywood police station. Police surmised Entwistle jumped to her death from the letter H.

It's actually illegal to hike up to the sign and the roads leading up as close as you can get are winding, butt puckering-narrow and designed, it seems, to get you utterly lost. Be that as it may, with Doug at the wheel, we crashed-- er, I mean, we pushed our way through the obstacles and made our way to the top of the mountain, getting not only a good look at the sign but the rest of the valley to boot.

### Pinks Hot Dogs



Following our harrowed drive, we stopped at another of Hollywood's landmarks - PINKS - for a little snack before dinner. Pink's was founded by Paul and Betty Pink in 1939 as a pushcart near the corner of La Brea and Melrose. The Great Depression was still having an impact on the country, and money was scarce. People could purchase a chili dog made with Betty's own chili recipe accompanied by mustard and onions on a steamed bun for 10 cents each.

As business grew, thanks to Betty's chili and the custom-made Hoffs-brand hot dogs with their natural casings, so did Pink's. The family built the current building in 1946 at 709 North La Brea.

Pink's has named several newer menu items after Hollywood celebrities, some of whom can be seen at the restaurant. There are many signed celebrity photographs hanging on the walls inside; some celebrities have signed more than one photo. The celebrity-named hot dogs are often versions actually ordered by the person in question, such as the "Martha Stewart Dog" with mustard, relish, onions, chopped tomatoes, sauerkraut, bacon, and sour cream. Another is the "Rosie O'Donnell Long Island Dog", which is a 10" dog topped with mustard, onions, chili and sauerkraut. The "Huell Howser Dog" is a standard chili dog with two of the regular hot dogs on a single bun while the "Ozzy Spicy Dog" named for Ozzy Osbourne features a Polish sausage, nacho cheese, American cheese, grilled onions, guacamole and chopped tomatoes. A smaller selection of hamburgers is available, and desserts are a choice of coconut or marble cake.



It wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

### **/// DECEMBER 2<sup>ND</sup> - THOUGHTS ON IRIS**



*Join us in the First Floor Rotunda (next to the Kodak Theatre Box Office) at 2:45pm. We will be watching some rehearsals with staff on hand to answer questions. Then, in CirqueCon tradition, step onto the IRIS stage for a group photo! After 3pm late comers will be out of luck! Don't be late!!*

So by 2:30pm we re-assembled outside the Kodak Theater to begin our scheduled Cirque activities, but not before making a quick stop over at our hotel (the Orchid Suites, right behind the Kodak Theater), for Doug's birthday hat. I'd been hearing about this hat for quite some time and since today was Doug's birthday, the hat's maker (Emily) thought this would be the perfect time to unleash it. Oh my, what a hat! Doug decided to wear it over to the theater and in doing so got accosted by Keith - it was too funny.

The activity itself was actually quite nice and actually very interesting. While the trapeze artist (Uuve Jansson) was busy in the background practicing her maneuvers (with Sasha Pikhienko, her coach assisting), a panel of seven joined us for the afternoon Q&A session.

And not just any seven people, these were the heads of their respected offices! They were:

- Denise Biggi, Artistic Director
- Claudette Waddle, General Stage Manager
- Kevin Kiely, Technical Director
- Robert Foster, Head of Automation
- Mark Jenkins, Head of Carpentry
- Chris Latsch, Head of Electrics
- Jared Peter, Head of Properties



I have to say it was one of the best Q&A sessions we've had at CirqueCon, with a number of fantastic stories about how they came into the business, how each came to Cirque du Soleil, and some of the roadblocks they faced, and hurdles they had to overcome to load in the show (not to mention some of the tension they felt at having to unload the show for the upcoming Academy Awards). About an hour or so later we all stepped on-stage for a group photo (which you can see here, thanks to Passionate Tim Steele) and then gathered at The Grill on Hollywood to eat, drink, and talk of our shared passion for Cirque du Soleil.





### CirqueCon Group Meal

At 5:00pm, gather with more than 30 other Cirque Passionates (in a specially reserved area) to eat, drink, and talk of our shared "passion." A perfect way to prepare for the continuing wonders to come. The four of us (Doug, Mary, Emily and I) went upstairs and into the outside patio of the group meal restaurant - The Grill on Hollywood - to knock back a few drinks since we broke from the Q&A session a little early. Well, they knocked back a few whilst I nursed just one, but it turned out to be a nice place to relax away an hour while we waited for the real feast to begin. Then at the appointed time we settled the checks and took our seats inside; a number of passionates had already arrived.

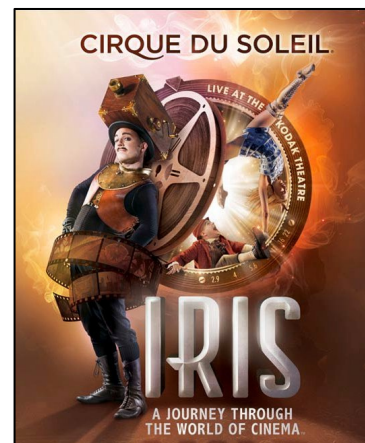


We joined Angelica and Rafael Serrano. Although at first conversation was rather strained - once the libations started flowing freely, Doug got into quite a number of interesting conversations with our table-mates, which turned more risqué as the night wore on. Who knew? The couple always seemed rather put off and stuck up but they were quite the interesting pair, had led an interesting life and done a number of interesting things!

As for the food? We started with a Caesar salad then had our choice of three main dishes: Chicken Piccata (chicken breast medallions in lemon butter caper sauce), Charbroiled Atlantic Salmon (in salsa fresca with the chef's vegetable choice) and Charbroiled Skirt Steak (marinated in citrus juices, soy sauce and special seasonings). We finished up with a fresh baked mixed-berry cobbler with whipped cream and then prepared for the show. And then, by 8:00pm, we re-assembled at the Kodak Theater to take in Cirque du Soleil's IRIS.

### IRIS, The Concept

Cirque du Soleil's IRIS draws much of its inspiration from Hollywood in all its past and present glory. The initial spark of the concept, though, was ignited during Cirque du Soleil's performance at the 74th Academy Awards - held in the Kodak Theater on March 24, 2002 - nearly 10 years ago. That night, for five minutes, Cirque du Soleil was the focus of the awards ceremony. It took the company four months to create the special show seen that night, which featured eleven acts from some of their most popular productions at the time: Dralion, La Nouba, Quidam, Mystère, "O" and Alegría, all set to the electro-urban sound of the La Nouba soundtrack. It was so well received that it set the creative wheels at Cirque in motion. The result: a poetic phantasmagoria inspired by the world of cinema.



The name of the show, IRIS, taken directly from a camera diaphragm as well as the colored iris of the human eye, presents an imaginary journey through the evolution of cinema - from the foundations of the art form to the bustle of the soundstage - through optical effects and film genres. IRIS transposes into a language of dance and acrobatics all of cinema's splendor, inventiveness and, above all, its sense of wonder. IRIS also conjures up a place between motion and picture, light and sound, which shifts constantly between reality and make-believe, to explore the limitless possibilities of cinema. By combining dance, acrobatics, live video, film footage and interactive projections, the show illustrates both the mechanics of cinema and its extraordinary power to deceive the eye through a number of "scenes" using acrobatics as their core, such as: Aerial Straps Duo, Contortion, Hand-to-Hand, Filmstrip, Icarian Games, Movie Set, Trapeze & Brooms, Trampoline, Hand Balancing and a Cirque du Soleil favorite: Bungees.



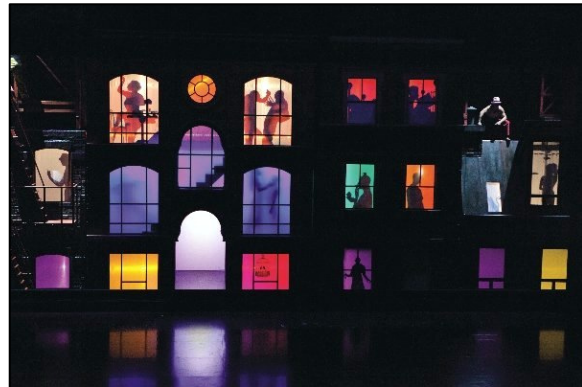
### IRIS, My Thoughts

Theme /// The theatrical tapestry behind Cirque du Soleil's IRIS is the plight of two young heroes - Buster and Scarlett - who find themselves plunged into the joyful chaos of a film set; their escapades transporting the spectator into a kaleidoscope of movement, moods and images supported by Danny Elfman's magnificent orchestral score. Buster himself is a melancholy composer in search of true love and somewhere between reality and make-believe; he spots the girl of his dreams; Scarlet, a naïve actress who longs to become a movie star. But will Buster and Scarlett find each other in the real world? Only on the journey of IRIS can one find out (and **\*\*SPOILER\*\***, yes they do.) A number of acts in the show help support this cliché (but pure celluloid) plotline, and though not as esoteric as ZED, Mystère, "O" or Quidam, IRIS was quite fun and way more enjoyable than more recent fare, Zarkana and MJ Immortal for example.



Score /// The score, crafted by venerable motion picture composer Danny Elfman ("Beetlejuice", 1989's "Batman", "Dick Tracy", "Edward Scissorhands", "The Nightmare Before Christmas" and much, much more), is a wonder to hear mixed live. The choice of the orchestral approach reflects the fact that over 95 percent of film music since the 1930s has been scored for full orchestras, and this imparts to the show a sonic connection between circus and film via strings, brass, harps, flutes, clarinets, bassoons and so on, as opposed to the sounds of a jazz or rock ensemble. Cirque utilizes a blend of 100 orchestral musicians to create the pre-recorded portions of the soundtrack (the largest in Cirque du Soleil's history) spread over both large and small ensembles. This is then mixed with the show's eight live in-house musicians to create a wonderful aura of sound. But strangely enough there are no singers! (And you don't really miss them).

Lighting /// The lighting of more recent shows has been an issue for me, explained away by the switch from normal gels to LED-style lighting equipment. One of the gripes I've had with this change (although I support the "greener" LED lighting, no pun intended) is that LEDs, whether white or colored, are too discrete. At times they're not bright enough while at other times too bright and the light projected feels cold, unforgiving and uninviting.



In fact, lighting was one of the interesting contrasts in 2008's ZED: although I loved the show dearly, the lighting left me with some difficulty "warming up" to some of the show's more emotional moments. In 2009's OVO and 2010's TOTEM, this form of lighting became more of an issue to me. And as for 2011's ZARKANA, well, that's a horse of a different color. IRIS, thankfully, has solved (or at least masked) many of the lighting issues I've seen lately by creating a much warmer ensemble. And thankfully so.

Projections /// Much ado has been made about IRIS' projections and the technology behind them. Early in the show, real-time projections of acrobats' performances capture their movements as trails of still images - in very much the same way that frames of film create the persistence of vision effect that we see as motion pictures. The intended result is a living decomposition of movement that takes on a luminous life of its own as an ever-changing abstract kaleidoscope above the action, but the observed result is a needless distraction from the main event itself - the performers! This type of projection is used during the Contortion and Hand-to-Hand acts to much dismay, ruining (IMO) what should be the focus, the movement of the performers' bodies, not the photonic outlines behind them that trace and then follow as they move about.





Costumes /// In a brilliant tribute to cinema, the costumes in IRIS are the result of a visual exploration of a broad range of themes connected with the invention of cinema: the taking of pictures and the recording and transmitting of sound and light. The costumes Philippe Guillotel designed let IRIS follow the major stages in the evolution of color in film, from black and white and sepia, through Technicolor and colorization to the deliberately saturated colors of films like Dick Tracy. The symbiosis between the costumes and the technical inventions of cinema is particularly striking in the half-human/half machine 'hybrid' characters. One of these wears a skirt reminiscent of the praxinoscope, one of the first animation devices. Based on the stroboscopic effect, this costume illustrates the decomposition of movement. The circular structure of the skirt reveals - through slots as it rotates - two boxers in action. This is just one of the show's innovative, but hardly seen, characters.



Others include: "camera men", whose costumes include a camera mounted on their head or chest; a "sound man", who wears a large carbon fiber cone; a "Screen Man", whose costume conceals a 135 sq ft. screen that comes out of his stomach, and a character whose costume is inspired by the first sound equipment used to detect the sound of bombs in war. The influence of Dick Tracy is front and center in a number that pays tribute to gangster



movies. The artists who leap up and down the buildings from trampolines in the stage floor are wearing bright red, yellow and blue tartan suits. In the Aerial Ballet number the costumes of the bungee- jumping "diamond women" are studded with nearly one million Swarovski crystals. In the air, the artists themselves are not as visible as the brilliance of the stones, which give their bodies a smooth and bright look. The costumes worn by the Icarian Games "Kiriki" characters are an evocation of costumes in the films of Georges Méliès (and they are one of the costume ensembles that do not work, in my opinion; they looked like little bug characters from OVO!). The hybrid Furniture Characters are artists whose costumes make them look exactly like pieces of living room furniture: two chairs, a lamp, a table and a moose head on the wall. At one point, as part of a movie, they all come to life and unfold in a matter of seconds.

Acts /// The acrobatic performances are, of course, the most important aspect for this observer. I want to see the evolution of skill and presentation that I've come to know and love about Cirque du Soleil, as well as be wowed by how the entire package comes together. Each of the acrobatic numbers presented in IRIS are on-par with what you'd find in other Cirque du Soleil shows, whether they be on tour in the Grand Chapiteau or Arena format or taking up residence in a specially designed theater. But, as with Zarkana, I felt there was no real advance in acrobatic skill here. Only what appeared to be a focus on the show's projection technology.



The show's acrobatic pieces open on the Atherton Twins' Aerial Straps Duo number, beautifully performed with precision and grace; they yield to the Contortion artists who do much better here than they did in Banana Shpeel (they're rescues from that ill-fated show - although I rather preferred their costuming and lighting there). The show began to break down artistically during the Hand-to-Hand number - two



porters launch their partners into the air to perform stunning feats requiring absolute mastery and control while kaleidoscopic projections above the acrobats (generated live by their every move) decompose motion to add a poetic dimension to their number. But it didn't. The projections were tacky and when a black-clothed artist coming on stage during one trick to spot it destroyed any illusion the artists attempted to create. This disconcerting feeling continued through to the next act, Filmstrip - a choreography that calls for high-speed precision, performers advancing from one frame of film to the next to create the illusion of continuous movement. And though the performers create the illusion well, the visual went on a tad too long in my opinion and broke down into a cacophony of chaos when it should have just stopped. Thankfully the Icarian Games performers appeared next and brought things together acrobatically - though I am not a fan of the bug-like costumes they are forced to wear.



The second half of the show continued the cacophony of chaos I mentioned earlier through an interesting number simply called "The Movie Set". "Controlled chaos reigns over a succession of highly visual numbers and audacious plunges as a bold allusion to various aspects of filmmaking," the official description goes. The choreography brings the circus disciplines of teeterboard, Spanish web, Russian bars, aerial silk and floor gymnastics (which I was happy

to see, even if their inclusion was fleeting at best - the disciplines would no sooner appear then disappear again!) and original choreography. Although executing a number as chaotic as this deserves some praise, the action was all over the place, which made it hard to not only focus on the images at hand but appreciate the skills involved. Trapeze & Brooms, thankfully, slowed things down (and it did not disappoint). Here an artist on stage (Buster, or a performer who is supposed to "be" Buster) manipulates his broom (quite a slick maneuver actually) while above him, a trapeze artist - the embodiment of his dream - performs.





Then a really creative segue segment, simply titled "Noir", evokes the black and white film era through the exploration of a building's tenants through their open windows. Using an inventive coordination of screens and staging, bits of action popping into color for only a moment before the light/camera moved on to another window, it was truly a highlight. But then chaos reigned again in "The Rooftop" where, in a tribute to gangster movies and to the work of stunt actors, trampolinists deliver a number packed with thrills on the roofs of buildings, multiplying their astounding leaps, flips and glides in a non-stop action movie atmosphere. Cool maneuvers and nice trampoline moves, but the constant movement was a wee bit distracting (and it went on a little too long). Hand Balancing and Bungees round out the show. Although it was nice

to see Olga Pikhienko perform on the hand balancing canes again (having previously seen her perform in Quidam and Varekai), there was little change in her performance (and her role here, to share a kiss with the hero, is also seemingly copied from Varekai); and the Bungee performers do take flight... so long as you're in the right seat (otherwise viewing might be limited!)

\* \* \*

Despite all the nit-picking I have with the presentation of the show I had a great time as an audience member. Cirque du Soleil's IRIS is standing on much firmer ground artistically than Zarkana. Everything feels just about right. With some tightening of those longer-running segments, fleshing out the emotion in the story of two star-crossed lovers, and losing some of the gimmicky projection work, IRIS will be a Cirque du Soleil powerhouse. It should prove interesting to see this show again in the future after its fixation period has ended and the performers have had some time to mature into their roles. All the elements are there.



Lights! Camera! Cirque!

P.S. CirqueCon didn't end following the performance - there was one little surprise left to spring upon our members: a post-show meet and greet with the Atherton twins, who graciously took time to not only answer some of our pressing questions about their work, but also pose for a few photos. Thanks guys!



DECEMBER 2011

## « CirqueWeek 2011 – Las Vegas »

Part 1: Mystère, a Proposal, and MJ IMMORTAL!

Whether you're a casual fan, an enthusiast, a Cirque devotee, a super fan or an aficionado, Cirque du Soleil has created the perfect event to satiate your appetites for all things Cirque. It's called CirqueWeek and it's a gathering of Cirque du Soleil fans (a convention if you will, similar to CirqueCon but organized not by fans but by Cirque du Soleil itself) that offers unique show and event packages with exclusive behind-the-scenes experiences.

First announced in 2010 as a collaboration between Cirque and the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (as a means to bring more guests to Las Vegas during what is arguably its slowest season for visitors - winter), the inaugural event proved quite popular. Many wondered following the event if CirqueWeek was just a one-time happening or if a second would be bestowed.

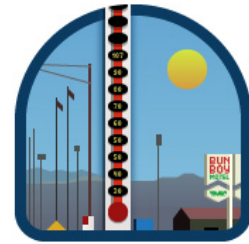
By summer 2011 the answer arrived: From December 1st through 10th (ten days this time, rather than five), the second annual CirqueWeek would commence with behind-the-scenes Q&As & unplugged performances, meet & greet photo opportunities with characters, technology demonstrations, special fan receptions, exclusive performance and dress rehearsal opportunities, plus, for this year only, the opportunity to be one of the first to attend Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL World Tour and first ever Michael Jackson Fan Fest!



I was in town for some of the activities surrounding CirqueWeek, as were many fans of Cirque du Soleil, but I also missed a first few days of the event. Why? I was in Hollywood watching IRIS as part of CirqueCon 2011 of course!

## /// WHAT WE MISSED

The "World's Largest", the "World's Tallest" and/or the "World's Biggest" usually accompanies these types of attractions - they're what are now referred to as Roadside Americana, those off-beat tourist attractions that once attracted droves of people (no doubt in the 50s and 60s) as journeymen traveled down Route 66 as they made their way to the West Coast. Whether it be the World's Biggest Show, or World's Largest Cactus, or the Little A'lie'inn... there's plenty of oddities to discover along America's highways. And today I got to see one of them. The World's Tallest Thermometer.



Located in Baker, California, USA, the World's Tallest Thermometer is technically an electric sign rather than a tall thermometer. However, it exists as a tribute to the record 134 degrees Fahrenheit (57 degrees Celsius) recorded in nearby Death Valley on July 10, 1913. Weighing in at 76,812 pounds and held together by 125 cubic yards of concrete, its temperature readings may be viewed from three different angles from along Interstate 15. It stands 134 feet tall and is capable of displaying a maximum temperature of 134, both of which are a reference to the temperature record. Approved by San Bernardino County Planner Nancy Sansonetti, it was built in 1991 by the Young Electric Sign Company of Salt Lake City, Utah and has stood adjacent to a Bob's Big Boy

restaurant ever since. Its maintenance rises up to \$40,000 each year and it's been only recently that the thermometer has fallen into disrepair and no longer properly registers the temperature. The closing of the Big Boy and the mini-mart at its base is partly to blame. Even the plaque describing the thermometer has been removed.

Ahh... but it's yet another point I can be proud to have checked-in from.







Meanwhile, The REVOLUTION Lounge at The Mirage became Ground Zero for CirqueWeek activity, from 11:00am through 3:00pm each day. Here Cirque enthusiasts could mingle with other like-minded fans, pick up their event credentials (a lanyard and specially designed Cirque Week 2011 badge, which would identify you as a member and grants access to the special events), get their gift bags (which included an exclusive full-color program book that highlighted the week's schedule, a light-flashing luggage tag, an event logo button, a Cirque Week branded

plastic drinking glass with squirrely sipping straw, and a Cirque Week T-Shirt). Although alcoholic beverages were not on sale during this time (nor was the club in its iconic lighting), if you'd never been inside the REVOLUTION lounge before, this was a cool opportunity!

From 2:00pm until 3:00pm on Thursday, December 1st, we missed a workshop given by select "O" characters at the "O" Theater at Bellagio, who saw if fans had what it took to be an "O" artist. Fans learned how to mime, dance and clown their way across the "O" stage, and then after the workshop, were treated to a question and answer (Q&A) session with a number of artists and coaches from the show.



Then on Friday, December 2nd, we missed out on two activities. The first, a Custom Theater Technology Demonstration and Q&A at LOVE, one of the most technically advanced Cirque du Soleil theaters in Las Vegas. In addition, the technical presentation showcased the 11 lifts that make up the stage, 24 digital projectors, 204 moving lights and much more. A Q&A opportunity followed featuring experts in the areas of Sound, Automation, Lighting and

Projections, learning all about the technical aspects of LOVE. The second activity of the day was a welcome reception for all CirqueWeek attendees held at the REVOLUTION Lounge at the Mirage (from 5:00pm until 6:00pm). It was a Magical Mystery Tour we just couldn't make in time... (We were still at CirqueCon.)

### **/// DECEMBER 3<sup>RD</sup> – MICHAEL JACKSON THE IMMORTAL**

Although an exclusive peek at the business side of Cirque du Soleil was held at the Zumanity Theater at New York New York this afternoon, we were still on our way into town, so we missed this too. That being said, Nicole and I did have an interesting experience down at Mandalay Bay late this night: a viewing of Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL World Tour.

Billed as a riveting fusion of visuals, dance, music and fantasy that immerses audiences in Michael's creative world and literally turns his signature moves upside down, Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL World Tour unfolds Michael Jackson's artistry before the eyes of the audience. Aimed at lifelong fans as well as those experiencing Michael's creative genius for the first time, the show captures the essence, soul and inspiration of the King of Pop, celebrating a legacy that continues to transcend generations. THE IMMORTAL World Tour takes place in a fantastical realm where we discover Michael's inspirational Giving Tree - the wellspring of his creativity. The secrets of Michael's inner world are unlocked - his love of music and dance, fairy tale and magic, and the fragile beauty of nature. The underpinnings of THE IMMORTAL World Tour are Michael Jackson's powerful, inspirational music and lyrics - the driving force behind the show-brought to life with extraordinary power and breathless intensity. Through unforgettable performances Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL World Tour underscores Michael's global messages of love, peace and unity.



Uh huh...



As a child who was born in the late 70's, and consequently one who grew up in the 80's, I'm well versed in Michael Jackson's hits. I've heard many of them premiere on the radio. I saw Thriller's video premiere on MTV. That being said, beyond his #1's, much of his catalog is a blur to me, so in this way you could consider me a fan, but a very casual one. Nicole, who was born in the middle of Michael Jackson's hey-day (mid 1980's), she too grew up to know most of Jackson's hits. Between the two of us we were comfortable knowing the man and his legacy, but neither of us was prepared for what we experienced inside Mandalay Bay's arena... it wasn't pretty.



First, our seats were quite possibly the worst they could be (the last row as high and far away as you could get, but what do you expect for the cheapest ticket you could find?) Second, the audio in the complex was not well designed (a shortcoming which was compensated with volume... too much of it.) Third, many of the songs the show used were a little "obscure" to people like us (you know, casual fans of Michael who, as I said earlier, know his biggest hits only.) And if that were all our complaints we probably could have lived with it... but we lost it at oversized shoes, a dancing sequined glove, and a DJ-ing Bubbles the Chimp.



Beyond that let me take a moment to discuss the "Thriller" scene that comes about half-way into the show. Here is a song that's probably the most iconic of Michael's songs, but the dance is no slouch either. Everyone knows how to do the Thriller, or at least part of it, and everyone knows exactly how it should be done... except the

performers. No, here, the scene re-imagines MJ's original choreography for Thriller, showcasing some of these iconic moves, but not really doing them justice. Getting this right is a no brainer, something that must absolutely happen in rehearsals! Alas, not here.

An intriguing piece of choreography, though, comes with the "They Don't Really Care About Us" scene, a re-enactment of a number that was originally designed for Michael's THIS IS IT concert tour before he died. Here artists are dressed like soldiers wearing robot suits with LED breastplates and line up to "perform" some kind of choreography in unison. The first thing that struck me when I saw them was "Cylons detected on DRADIS!" And then they began to march... looking like Mondoshawan from The Fifth Element movie.





Of course it wasn't all bad. The "lean" in "Smooth Criminal" was cool, the robot man in "Dancing Machine" was an interesting concept, and the lead dancer had some mad MJ dancing skills (which he pulled out at the drop of a hat), but probably the best element of the show was its ending... not because it was over, but because we finally had a good mix of MJ's hits - "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough", "Billie Jean" and "Black or White" - beautifully choreographed and celebrated, all of which segued into "Man in the Mirror", the perfect closing song.



Michael Jackson THE IMMORTAL World Tour is supposed to feel like one of MJ's concerts, at least that's what all the press materials tell me. But it doesn't, really. Not that I've ever been to one mind you... but if this is how MJ's concerts really were, maybe I'm glad I never experienced one!

## /// DECEMBER 4<sup>TH</sup> – BUNGEE DEMONSTRATION

**Bungee Demonstration and Costume Q&A**

**Mystère Theatre at Treasure Island | 4:00pm - 5:00pm**

*Look up! It's a bird... it's a plane... it's the Mystère Bungee Warriors! Enjoy an exclusive demonstration of the bungee act at Mystère and a chance to talk to the artists who take flight ten times each week. There will also be colorful costumes on display and our Head of Wardrobe will be on hand to talk about the bungee costumes and the challenges of maintaining costumes for this very acrobatic show.*



This morning started with a jolt from Starbucks, a quick walk over to the Mirage to pick up our Cirque Week credentials (which consisted of a bag full of goodies: a T-shirt, an event programme book, a badge and lanyard, a flashing luggage tag, a plastic squirrely straw cup and a couple of buttons), then it was a ride out to the National Atomic Testing Museum, just a few minutes off-Strip for something a little different...



The National Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, documents the history of nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site (NTS) in the desert north of Las Vegas. The museum operates as an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. The museum opened in March 2005 as the "Atomic Testing Museum", operated by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation as a non-profit organization. The museum covers the period from the first test at NTS on January 27, 1951, to the present.

Among its exhibits covering American nuclear history is a "Ground Zero Theater" which simulates the experience of observing an atmospheric nuclear test. Other exhibits include Geiger counters, radio badges and radiation testing devices, Native American artifacts from around the test area, pop culture memorabilia related to the atomic age, equipment used in testing the devices. Other displays focus on important figures at the facility, videos and interactive exhibits about radiation.

It was intriguing...





Following the Museum we ended up at the Bellagio for a bit, taking in the treasures of the "O" Store and wandering about the Hotel/Casino. A little gelato and coffee helped perk us up and then we made the trek back to Treasure Island for Mystère's special activities as part of Cirque Week.

Mystère (which just reached its 8,500th performance recently and also celebrated their 18th anniversary at Treasure Island - on Christmas Eve) is my all-time favorite Cirque du Soleil show, and being given the opportunity to watch the bungee artists rehearse while also getting hands-on with some of the costumes meant this was one panel I could not miss. And though I was stuck in traffic on the roads behind the casinos usually reserved for servicing (thanks in large part to the closure of Las Vegas Boulevard, a.k.a. "The Strip", for the marathon running later that evening), we didn't miss one minute of it, arriving at the doors to the Mystère Theater just in the nick of time.



As costuming was the main topic of this panel, we were greeted by the Head of Wardrobe - Tamara, and her assistant - Julie and in the process learned quite a number of interesting facts about the costumes of Mystère.

- Every costume starts in Montreal, and are the same designs as those created at the beginning of Mystère, but costume maintenance occurs locally, especially for fragile pieces that may need replacing daily. The annual budget for the show is a little over \$1 million USD, so they must be resourceful.



- The Mystère costume crew is twice as big as those found at other Cirque du Soleil shows, with a crew of twenty working between 8:00am and Midnight each performance day, supporting the seventy-five to eighty artists and technicians Mystère employs.
- Therefore, the Head of Wardrobe, whose job it is to secure all costume needs before the next show, is the last to leave after any performance.
- A performer can use up to six costumes throughout a performance, portraying up to eleven different looks during a show. Every performer has two costumes each and it can take up to sixty-five costume pieces to achieve those eleven variations.

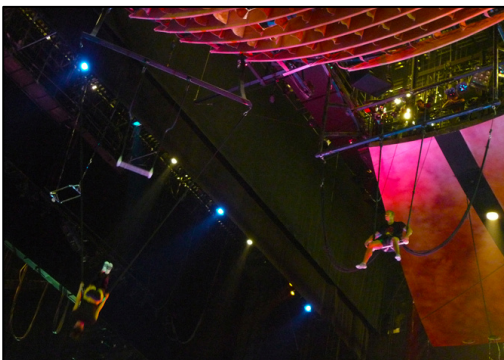


- All those changes mean a lot of sweat, which means a lot of laundry. Though machine washed (as 90% of the costumes are made from Lycra stretch material), no costume is dried in a conventional dryer. All costumes are placed where fans blow them dry. Every item, including shoes, is washed at least weekly. But it does wear out the clothes: the florescent die in the Chinese Poles costumes don't last that long - up to three weeks before the garment needs to be replaced.
- With all that laundering and use the costumes take quite a beating, but costume fit is very important at Mystère (and at Cirque in general) as it's a safety issue.

- For example, if a Chinese Poles garment is not properly fitted, it could snag on the poles when a performer is expecting to slide, causing an accident or a wardrobe malfunction.
- Such malfunctions became more prevalent after Cirque was forced to change suppliers for the Lycra - they found the Chinese Poles artists were comfortable performing when the costumes went on (as they were perfectly fitted for them), but the costumes began to stretch as they performed, reacting to their ever increasing body heat and thus began to snag!



- And what of other types of costume maladies, how are those dealt with? When the show is ON that evening, dressers come in around 4:00pm to address colored tags an artist has placed on their garments.
- Pink tags mean that the costume needs some special attention when being washed and therefore the Wardrobe department knows what to look for. A Yellow tag means "caution", even more attention is required here - there might be a tear. A green tag is used to indicate a biohazard, such as a blood or some other bodily fluid (besides sweat). And costumes tagged in red are dead.
- Maintenance can be performed at anytime, but generally is done during the four weeks throughout the year *Mystère* is dark. Bungee artists costumes require a lot of touch ups due to the "spaghetti strings" (as they call them) that have to be trimmed in such a way so that they don't wrap around the artists (or the trapeze) in flight. But that has happened before - during a show - preventing the aerialist from performing their act.



And then our attention turned to the Bungee artists, who were taking their seats on the trapezes above our heads. Carl, the head coach for the Bungees, talked us through the rehearsal while the artists got settled. He explained that every bungee artist has another number they perform in the show, such as being part of the Trampoline or Chinese Poles, or appearing as one of the show's esoteric characters, making a cue or some other kind of appearance. And for every on-stage

bungee performance artist, there's another in the catwalks above the stage assisting - making them swing and/or helping adjust the bungees themselves when they're out of sync, a point that was demonstrated to us when the Warriors failed to meet up in the middle.

In fact, part of today's rehearsal was training new assistants, who will put the swing in their performance. It was a little rough as timing is everything - pull too softly, too hard or not in sync and the performance will be off. Of course, a number of other factors can make the performance go awry. For example, the bungee cords are natural rubber and are affected by humidity. The length of the cords for the start of the act is set dependent on the measured humidity in the theater. The humidity at the start of this practice was 11%. To prepare the artists for the chest-to-chest finale, 26 inches were added to the length of the cords near the end of the act, but it wasn't enough.



Safety is, of course, paramount at Cirque du Soleil and even the bungee artists have earwigs (small ear phones) to hear cues (such as "pull" and "release" to the assistants above). Those calling the cues see the performers at all times through an intricate closed-circuit camera setup and communicate over four distinct channels: A, B, C and D. The main show is called off Channel A. Lighting cues are done exclusively through Channel

B. Channels C and D are available for the band and other needs, should they arise. Do they ever get interference? Why, yes they do! In fact the show recently had to change some of their audio channels because they were being flooded over by an expansion of the local police channels. Can you imagine getting a call on a robbery while you're attempting a flight?

Following their practice routines we had a moment to chat with a few of the bungee artists who were asked how much their headpieces weighed and about any discomforts they might feel tumbling about over our head. One warrior said they experience no discomfort during the week - "This is my playground!; however, we 'see stars' after coming back from an extended break." The other warrior said, "Spinning in the direction we're used to is fine but spinning a hula hoop would make us sick!" Oh, and the headpieces weigh about six pounds each.

Following the rehearsal and Q&A session, the fans were granted a marvelous chance to examine actual *Mystère* costumes and props up close. These included wigs and headdresses from various characters, shoes of all shapes, sizes and colors, props (such as the candelabra), a Bungee, Trampoline (*Spermatoza*), and other dancers' costumes, and an *Asticots* mask (the Chinese poles double-faced character). And if you were lucky enough (as Nicole and I were), you could even have tried on one of these costumes - and head pieces! - and become one of *Mystère*'s fantastic characters!





\* \* \*



The Mystère panel was totally awesome, and I couldn't have asked for anything more out of the experience (except to pound on a taiko drum please?), but CirqueWeek continued on. At its conclusion we thought it was best to try and find something to eat and since Doug and Mary had selected the place for last night's meal (the TI Buffet) it was our turn to choose the location. And where might that be? BLT Burger at The Mirage, of course! As the restaurant's name suggests, BLT is known for its burgers and they have a wide range of good ones to choose from, but it wasn't the burgers that Nicole and I wanted... we wanted a Night Rider.

What's a Night Rider? The best chocolate alcoholic drink on the planet! To make one: you take three or more scoops of your best succulent chocolate ice cream, pour in a few shots of Kahlua, some Chocolate liquor, chocolate sauce then blend all that up nicely. Garnish with some chocolate whipped cream, some chocolate cookie crunches and a huge-ass straw to drink it from and viola, you have a Night Rider.

They. Are. Awesome. And oh yes we partook!

We walked off our dinner via the Forum Shops at Caesars then made our way over to Bellagio...

Where I got on one knee and asked Nicole to marry me.

She said yes, of course!

And right after her favorite song began to play on the Bellagio Fountains...

How did I manage that? It's my little secret!

Then we took in Cirque du Soleil's "O" at 10:00pm from the very top of the balcony, seats I can hardly recommend but ones we had to take. Although the show was not bad, there were times the lighting prevented us from seeing some of the aerial acts, which detracted from my overall enjoyment of the show. That and being way up in the rafters, feeling disconnected didn't help either.

All in all though, a very good night... wouldn't you say?





DECEMBER 2011

## « CirqueWeek 2011 – Las Vegas »

Part 2: Zumanity, ELVIS, & The Pinball Museum



If there's one memory we took back with us from our last trip to Las Vegas it's the breakfast foods at Cafe Bellagio. The warmth, texture and perfectly cooked bacon, eggs, French toast and pancakes were mouth watering and it was these foods we so wanted to have before we left Las Vegas again. So when the opportunity presented itself (Doug and Mary slept in), Nicole and I walked down to Bellagio to

partake... and oh, yum! And Nicole started the alcohol run early... look: an Apple Cider Vodka Martini!

Following breakfast we continued our exploration of the Strip, visiting the Lions at MGM Grand as well as the K&A store. We were here only to waste a little time because there was another Cirque Week adventure to be had; this one at the Zumanity Theater at 2:00pm.

### /// DECEMBER 5<sup>TH</sup> – ZUMANITY REHEARSAL

**Go Behind the Scenes with Zumanity**  
**Zumanity Theatre at NY-NY | 2:00pm - 3:00pm**

*Get up close & personal with the sexy artists of Zumanity! Guests will have the opportunity to sit through a live rehearsal of one of the show's acts, followed by a Q&A session with the artists and crew afterwards in the gorgeous Zumanity Theatre.*



CirqueWeek attendees poured into the voluptuously sensual Zumanity Theater for the second time (the first was the "Inside Cirque" panel giving fans an exclusive peek at the business side of the show through a Q&A with company President and CEO Daniel Lamarre, joined by a panel of key executives from numerous departments from Casting to Marketing) to partake in a series of rehearsals designed to give the show's sexy



vixens the wherewithal in case a particular performance did not go forward as planned. Called "what ifs," these run-throughs sketch out segments of the show whereby something crucial could go amiss, such as a missing prop, performers out sick, or what to do when a piece of equipment malfunctions. This type of rehearsal also allows for the integration of new artists into Zu's coven and tutor seasoned show performers with new marks or subtle ways to change-up their day-to-day performances.

There are multiple places throughout Zumanity where a cock-up might occur, and the performers continuously rehearse "what ifs" on a weekly basis, rotating through the acts in the show. Today's rehearsal centered on young Russian artist Arslan Gusengadzhiev's bone stretching act: Dislocation.



While we waited for the setup, Arslan explained to us how his skill differs from general contortion - contortionists entertain through their very limber, flexible bodies; a dislocation artist on the other hand is able to unhinge their limbs to twist themselves into unusual poses (for example, one of the poses he struck for us was a "backwards pushup" with his hands on the floor behind his back instead of in front of him - which elicited more

than a few gasps from the crowd). Although Arslan is flexible and he does need to rehearse, because of the danger of repeated dislocation, as the run-throughs commenced he only performed some of the easier moves, withholding those that strain his body the most. A video monitor was available showing the entire act from start to finish helping the audience maintain the context of his performance.

The first run-through was rather innocuous and straight-forward, allowing the newcomers a chance to interact with their marks first-hand and giving seasoned performers (such as silk artist Alan Jones Silva) a chance to ham it up as a John looking for a good time - and he'll pay! In fact, that's what the set-up of this performance is all about: Having no money to pay for some... companionship from the Botero Sister's harem of girls (they're running a brothel), Arslan attempts to woo the girls into a score of happy endings with his... unique talents. Does it



work? (SPOILER - unfortunately not, all the men strike out and the girls come away with all their money!)



The second scenario detailed what the company could do if Arslan's performance rug did not appear on the lift as it rose to performance height. It is imperative that Arslan's rug (or some kind of carpeting) be used as it is very unsafe for him to perform directly on the stage floor (as it would be unsafe for those performers who came out after... girls sliding around in their high heels... shameful!) Should the rug not

appear with the lift, the Satyr character (the one who runs on all fours) is tasked with fetching a rug off-stage for Arslan in adequate time and make the insertion of the set piece appear seamless to the action, so nothing is amiss! [And it works quite well!]

The third scenario dealt with the mechanical malfunction of a swing which lowers one of the girls down into the action on stage and then swings her back and forth as the action unfolds around her. Should the swing malfunction and not release the grips holding the performer in place, she could be crushed between two other set pieces moving on stage (in this scene, the backgrounds that make up the brothel). There are two ways the automation department can handle this situation: the first is to retract the swing to a safe point (which is programmed), which will allow the movement of the background pieces; the second is to leave her in the swing and stop the background pieces from moving, necessitating a change-up in how the girls exiting the thrust of the stage.



It was all quite exciting!

Following the rehearsals all the members of the ensemble came down to the thrust of the stage, introduced themselves and told the audience a little bit about who they are, what they did and how they came to Cirque du Soleil. It was quite the rare treat. From Africa to Russia and all points in between; who knew how worldly this cast really was? If you attended this activity you found out.

## /// DECEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup> – THE PINBALL MUSEUM

The day began with bacon, eggs and French toast at the Original Sunrise Cafe, located a few minutes' drive from the Las Vegas Strip. Following Breakfast was a trip to the Las Vegas Pinball Hall of Fame (1610 East Tropicana - right across the street from the Liberace Museum).

Las Vegas is known for the unusual and offbeat. Places like the Liberace Museum, the Neon Museum, the Clown Factory, The Elvis Museum, the Barry Manilow Store, the Pinball Hall of Fame... Wait a second. The Pinball Hall of Fame? What exactly is that? Or more importantly, why is there a Pinball Hall of Fame?



The Pinball Hall of Fame is an attempt by the members of the Las Vegas Pinball Collectors Club to house and display the world's largest pinball collection, open to the public. A not-for-profit corporation was established to further this cause. The games belong to one club member (Tim Arnold), and range from 1950s up to 1990s pinball machines. Since it is a non-profit museum, older games from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are the prevalent, as this was the 'heyday' of pinball. There are no 'ticket spitters' here (aka kiddie casinos or redemption). It's all pure pinball (and a few arcade novelty games) from the past. All machines are available for play, so not only can you see them, you can actually play your old favorites. The pinball machines are all restored to like-new playing condition by people that love pinball and understand how a machine should work. All older pinballs are set to 25 cents per play, and newer 1990s models are set to 50 cents per play.



The PHoF is run by Tim Arnold, a veteran arcade operator who made it big in the 1970s and 1980s during the Pacman era. In 1976 Tim and his brother opened 'Pinball Pete's' in Lansing, Michigan, and it quickly became a gamers' Mecca. At the height of their success, the Arnold brothers weren't counting coins; they were counting shovelfuls of coins. When Arnold sold his part of the business and moved to Las Vegas in 1990, he picked up the phone and started talking to the Salvation Army.





Midge Arthur, the administrative assistant of the Las Vega branch of the Salvation Army says, 'I got a telephone call from Tim about 15 years ago, and he said, 'If I had money to give, what would you do with it?' We had a long discussion about our different rehabilitation programs. He was, I think, kind of skeptical of all organizations. He wanted to make sure the money was going to help people.' Not long after that conversation, Midge Arthur started receiving checks for

thousands of dollars from the man she says is, 'one of my strangest, out-of-the-ordinary donors we have ever had.'

Although the area was a little skeezy, and the building wasn't very inviting from the outside, the inside was just as billed... and a lot of fun! Check them out when you're in Las Vegas - it was rather fun!



After playing a few games of Pinball (not to mention Super Mario Bros on an arcade Machine, which I sucked greatly at), we piled back into the van and hit up the Stratosphere - one of the casino-hotels I've never, ever been in if you can believe that. The Stratosphere is the northernmost of the major Strip casinos and the only one actually in the City of Las Vegas, as the rest of

the Strip south of Sahara Avenue is in the unincorporated townships of Paradise and Winchester. Its tower is also the tallest observation tower, and the 9th-tallest freestanding structure, in the United States, as well as being the tallest structure in Las Vegas.

What caught our attention to it was the SkyJump, a controlled descent, Bungee jumping-like ride that allows riders to plummet 855 ft (261 m) attached to a high speed, descent wire. We just so happened to see someone riding it as we drove by it. The effect is similar to bungee jumping. Guide wires keep riders from straying off course. Just prior to reaching the rapidly approaching ground, the machine slows the rider down, bringing them to a controlled landing. Otherwise, the property was pretty seedy. It's one of those properties that could really use a remake, like STAT. Luckily we didn't stay too long, though we did get a tour of the hotel's shabby mall complex.



Once Doug and Mary went back for a nap, Nicole and I hit the strip some more, returning to the Bellagio, walking through the Cosm (the Cosmopolitan; there's a story there: when we were last in Vegas the Cosmopolitan tower only had the first four letters of its name up on the buildings top, so everyday all we saw was "COSM"). The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas is a luxury resort casino and hotel that broke ground in October 2005 just south of the Bellagio on the west side of the Las

Vegas Strip and consists of two high-rise towers. The resort opened on December 15, 2010. The \$3.9 billion project features 2,995 rooms; a 75,000 sq ft (7,000 m<sup>2</sup>) casino; 300,000 sq ft (28,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of retail and restaurant space; a 40,000 sq ft (3,700 m<sup>2</sup>) spa and fitness facility; a 1,800 seat theater; and 150,000 sq ft (14,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of meeting/convention space. There we discovered the wonderful Chandelier Lounge; although we didn't get a chance to have a drink there, it was an interesting sight to see.

We made our way over to CityCenter and into ARIA to visit the VIVA ELVIS store next and eventually returned to Treasure Island to meet Doug and Mary for dinner at the Treasure Island Deli before assembling once more for the 7:00pm Mystère.



Attending Mystère is always a treat; it's a Cirque du Soleil classic among classics that has risen to never-to-miss status any time we come to Las Vegas. So when we made plans to come out here for a little of Cirque Week, we knew Mystère was a given. The show was partly the reason we met so Nicole and I were quite excited to be there tonight, even if the theater was less than half-full.

With it being an off-night in the middle of winter coupled with the Rodeo thing going on in town made for a rather limp audience, but being less than half-full did have its rewards: it allotted us the opportunity to sit elsewhere in the theater - in section 104 rather than the 203 seats we had purchased via CirqueWeek ticketing.

As soon as we settled into our new seats I spotted Lorraine, another Cirque Passionate, who had already been in town since the 1st of the month attending all of the Cirque Week activities (not to mention multiple shows); I introduced Nicole as my fiancé and we started chatting. But what I would say next had an impact on the rest of the night - I said... "Now that Cirque moved our seats... Nicole and I are right in the middle of "Man in the Box" territory. What if?!"



Lorraine looked up at me with a sparkle in her eye then trotted off to some front-of-the-house uniformed personnel. When she came back she told me they knew where we were and if Brian was in the mood, he'd select us. I thanked her wholeheartedly and waited.

The Man in the Box Routine is a classic bit of *Mystère*. Here the clown selects an unsuspecting couple and after taking the man up onstage and locking him in a wooden box, sits himself down with his girl and attempts to woo her with champagne... all while the audience roars with laughter. Having seen the show multiple times (and having been Papa once... but that's another story) I longed to be the Man in the Box. Why not? So I waited... and waited... and waited... but alas, no. I was this close... " " <--, but Brian #2 (the young one) picked the couple in front of us for the part.

Oh well. Next time!

But it didn't sour our night. Not at all. The show was spot on - Ross was fantastic as the Red Bird, as always - and we had a great time with the show. One thing of note, though: the musicians played the original High Bar music rather than the new music composed (to great fanfare) last year. I wasn't complaining... to hear the original High Bar music with the High Bar act was quite the treat... even if the performers seemed a little out of practice with the music.

It was a great way to end the trip.





APRIL 2012

## « O Brave New World... Amaluna! »

A Premiere on the Quays of Montreal

*"How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world  
that has such people in't." (Miranda, "The Tempest")*

There's nothing like a hometown crowd.

I've said it before and I'm sure I'll say it again. It's a clichéd old adage, but for a fan of Cirque du Soleil there's simply no substitute for being in the Grand Chapiteau with a couple of thousand Québécois, clapping and stomping to the show's beat - whether it be lounge-fusion, organ-fusion, Indian-fusion, insect-fusion, Native American-fusion or full-on rock-and-roll - and reveling in every single moment of it all. As an attendee of Cirque du Soleil touring show premieres for ten years, allowing one's self to be swept up in the awesomeness of premiere excitement is nothing short of magical; it's a euphoria you'll find nowhere else but in Cirque's hometown. I relish this feeling... especially with friends.

My first experience with this brand of euphoria came when witnessing Varekai's birth in 2002. I knew from the moment I stepped foot on the cobblestoned streets of the venerable old port of Montréal this was how you celebrated a premiere and I wanted to be a part of it from then on.

Traveling to Montreal for premiere weekend has provided many indelible memories. I'll never forget bouncing along outside the Grand Chapiteau on the third night of Varekai's performances having just procured a stand-by ticket while the harmonies of the show's opening overture played on; or watching "Mad Max" rip off his headdress and fly through the air between one Russian Swing to the other all the while twisting, turning and twirling about - the first time I ever seriously feared for an artist's safety; or forget about touring the Cirque du Soleil Headquarters with 100 or so Passionates as part of CirqueCon 2005; or forget sitting on the edge of my seat along with everyone else during Koozâ's many thrilling acts; or meeting and speaking with David Shiner, Koozâ's Director, during intermission) occasionally there's a miss-step.

Varekai and Koozâ were well received by the hometown crowd (how about standing ovations DURING the performance?); OVO not so much. For me personally Corteo was not a particularly good premiere, especially after coming off that spectacular Russian Swings ending to Varekai three years before, but the crowd enjoyed it.

OVO fared much, much worse by both me and the crowd I saw it with; in fact, the response was so tepid I was sure Cirque had its first bonafide flop on its hands! (That honor would fall to BANANA SHPEEL.) TOTEM was much better but even it had a "WOW + WTF" combination that made it a little uneven at the start, to me at least.

Subsequent viewings of both Corteo and OVO a little more than a year after premiere turned my viewpoint around (I'll see TOTEM for the first time since premiere this coming October as it winds its way through Atlanta) so it seems the third time is the charm. However, it is best to go in with the understanding that when you come to a premiere you're seeing a show that's not yet ready, that may have had only two or three full-run performances in front of the public... and that's it!

So with all that in mind how does AMALUNA fare?

I AM IN LOVE WITH THIS SHOW!

### **/// MEETING FRIENDS**

*"Welcome to Montreal, sir!"*

*"Thank you!"*

*"Oh, there's a message here for you..."*

*Who could that be from?* I said to myself, as the clerk went back behind the counter to check on the note.

I had just walked into the Spring Hill Suites du Vieux Port after spending more than an hour in customs/immigration and another in rush-hour traffic; I was late. I had expected to arrive at my hotel before 5:00pm, which would have allowed plenty of time to collect myself before heading off again, but clearly that was not to be. It was 5:45pm and someone was in search of me.



Although I've not missed a premiere since 2002's VAREKAI, following my experience with 2005's CORTEO I thought perhaps seeing shows later in the run would be better. I contemplated Toronto for 2007's Koozå but fortuitous events intervened (Cirque pushed Montréal previews up one week) and it seemed destiny called - I had to go! It was a good thing I went or else I would have missed out on meeting David Shiner during intermission right there in the Grand Chapiteau.

I learned my lesson and came to Montreal for 2009's OVO, but I was sorely disappointed with the show. I would not have come up for 2010's TOTEM had I not heard some amazing things about the show prior to its premiere (and its close proximity to New York City, where I was catching a performance of BANANA SHPEEL as part of CIRQUECON 2010). The decent experience I had with TOTEM lead to an understanding that perhaps coming to Montreal was not such a bad thing after all, even if I had "been there, done that" five times now.

So when AMALUNA was announced I did not hesitate to plan a trip up, but as April drew closer it seemed anything and everything was trying to keep me from going. A recent move to Atlanta from Orlando squeezed my wallet, plans to repeat a trip to New York City with a drive to Montreal and back fell apart, and high airfare to Montreal from Atlanta didn't help matters. Eventually throwing caution to the wind I bought tickets to the show, scoped out airfare from nearby airports (selecting a much cheaper round-trip from Charlotte, NC - a four-hour drive from Atlanta), renewed my passport and reserved a hotel in the old port of Montreal. I was going come hell or high water!

Could the message be Steve Long, from Connecticut? He'd messaged me earlier in the month that he'd decided to come up on a whim, suggesting he might be dropping by my hotel prior to the show. Could it be Mark Wyrick, from California? He and I met in Montreal somewhat by chance in 2002. Mark overheard my friends and me discussing



Varekai at L'Aventure, a restaurant on Jacques Cartier Square, and joined us. We've been friends ever since. Could it be Lorraine Peck, also from California? She was the first Passionate I knew of who'd be making the trek up. She was staying at her favorite hotel - *Auberge du Vieux Port* - just down the block from mine, and we'd discussed meeting up and hanging out during the weekend since she'd be here alone. So just who could it be?!

The clerk behind the counter returned a few moments later: it was Anne & Tim Brydon, from California! We'd also been in contact throughout the weeks leading up to AMALUNA's premiere, expressing hope that we could meet up before attending our first performance. Her note was quick and simple: "Tim and I will be going to this restaurant (attached card: the L'usine de Spaghetti, 273 rue St-Paul E) at 5:30pm - it's just down the street, turn left, and not far! Hope to see you soon!"

With an invitation like that who could refuse? This is what I came to Montreal for - to be with friends and fellow Cirque du Soleil Passionates. So what if I had just arrived? Drop everything and go. And I did! Within moments I was in my room, hopping online to search for the exact location of the restaurant (it wasn't far), messaging friends and loved ones that I had finally made it (and would see some of them at the Big Top that night), changing into some appropriate Cirque du Soleil attire (although no one would see it - brrrrr, it was cold in Montreal!) and flying out the door. I met Anne and Tim down at the restaurant a few moments later, et viola - instant magic!

I later ran into Steve Long and Lorraine Peck down at the Grand Chapiteau, Bill and Terri Preece during intermission and Mark Wyrick the following day - in the rain! (It rained all day!) - before our 4:00pm performance. I had such a fantastic weekend with these friends it pained me to part from them, even if it did snow the last day.

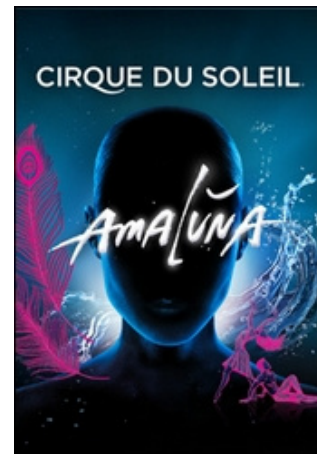
But what about the show?



## /// AMALUNA: THE SHOW

### Theme

For the first time in Cirque du Soleil's history, over 70% of the cast is female (and with an all-female band), as a result Amaluna features strong women characters plucked from history and literature alike, from the Amazons of Greek Mythology to the wily pages of Shakespeare (both "Romeo and Juliet" and "The Tempest" were inspirations). "Amaluna is a tribute to the work and voice of women," explained Director of Creation Fernand Rainville at the press conference. "The show is a reflection on balance from a woman's perspective," he added. Show Director Diane Paulus says: "Amaluna is less about feminism and more about reconnecting to our world in a different way."



In AMALUNA, we're invited to a mysterious island governed by Goddesses and guided by the cycles of the moon. Their queen, Prospera (played by Cellist-Saxophonist Julie McInnes; she also sings!), directs her daughter's coming-of-age ceremony in a rite that honors femininity, renewal, rebirth and balance that marks the passing of these insights and values from one generation to the next. The show's name draws its inspiration from the fusion of the words "ama", which refers to "mother" in many languages, and "luna", which refers to the "moon". It is at once both a symbol of femininity that evokes the mother-daughter relationship between Prospera and Miranda and the idea of a goddess and protector of the planet.

"In the wake of a storm caused by Prospera," Cirque du Soleil explains, "a group of young men land on the island, triggering an epic, emotional story of love between Prospera's daughter Miranda (played by Water-bowl/Hand-balancing artist Iulia Mykhailova), who is on the brink of womanhood, and a brave young suitor, Romeo (played by Chinese Pole artist



Édouard Doye). But theirs is a love that will be put to the test as jealous Cali (a pet, played by juggler Viktor Kee) attempts to thwart their union. The couple must face numerous demanding trials and overcome daunting setbacks before they can achieve mutual trust, faith and harmony.



## The Site

The AMALUNA Grand Chapiteau is set up on the Jacques Cartier Pier in the Vieux Port of Montreal, where Cirque du Soleil has staked its shows since the dawn of its recorded time (except for 1999's Dralion, which was set up on the lawn of their headquarters building in the city). Surrounded on three sides by water and history, the striped big top (doesn't Cirque do swirled tents anymore? Yes, but fleetingly now) called out. Although there were a number of banners about, advertising the show, Tapis Rouge (of course), Cirque's sponsors and the upcoming Montréal Complètement Cirque (an international Circus Arts Festival running from July 7-24 in which Cirque du Soleil is a participant), we wondered: where is the box office? Actually inside the merchandise tent!



It's almost hard to remember that Cirque du Soleil used to have two merchandise / concession tents for patrons based on their ticketed seat, so coming upon a Cirque Grand Chapiteau with a linked merchandise / concession tent construct isn't new; however, one with the box office INSIDE the merchandise tent is. I wondered if this is going to become a trend (I rather like it) or if it was tried because of the unpredictable weather Montreal is known to have in April. Either way, standing

inside and speaking to someone face-to-face for tickets is much better and more welcoming than standing outside, shaking and shimmying to keep warm while speaking through a small speaker to someone behind a plexi-glass window.

Otherwise the concessions offered at AMALUNA were the usual: sodas, bottled water, popcorn, hotdogs and regular confections. Of course we hit the merchandise stands and found the normal costume balls (from Totem), Cirque du Soleil t-shirts (with a couple of AMALUNA logo shirts for men and women alike), magnets, key-chains and the pre-requisite masks, CDs and DVD area. An Amaluna Pre-program was available as was the GAIA book - Guy Laliberté's pictures from Space, but most interesting was that Cirque du Soleil was selling the DELIRIUM show CD in a special combination with the AMALUNA pre-program (and a bag). With a recent (but very much unfounded) rumor that Cirque du Soleil was in talks to revive DELIRUM for installment in New York City we found this rather interesting.



### The Set & Stage

Entering a Grand Chapiteau is always a treat; when you step foot inside the big top the first time, for a brand new show, expectations run rampant, which only serves to heighten the excitement even more. When the flimsy doors of Amaluna's big top parted, my eyes were immediately drawn to Scott Pask's set, a "mysterious, verdant, enchanted island" set amongst a tangle of bamboo-like branches. Taking his cues from the natural world, especially from forests and plant life, Pask has created an environment that is both immersive and open, with plenty of space for dramatic rituals and ceremonies as well as acrobatic performances.

The "trees" thrust upward from the circumference of the stage and the Big Top's tent poles to form an airy canopy. Upstage, the vegetation grows closer to the ground, forming a tunnel-like grotto. (There are 174 branches in 534 sections - 90 in the canopy and 84 upstage - making a total of 1.7 km or



1.05 miles.) Although meant to invoke the outline of a peacock feather, the set also evokes the various curves, lines, swoops and folds of the female sex - an anatomically correct outline I might add - which, coupled with the two side wings of the set, (that bare a close resemblance to fallopian tubes) helps bring the audience into this female-dominated world.

The peacock feather decoration that occupies much of the middle of the Amaluna stage is a significant emblematic motif that is echoed in some of M  r  dith Caron's iridescent costumes. The magnificent bird that accompanies Hera - the Greek goddess of women, marriage and fertility - inspires the peacock images in the show. Legend tells us that the protective "eyes" in its tail watch over women in all the stages of their lives.

And amongst these trappings sits the water-bowl, a soothing pale-blue.

The stage is set. All we can do now is sit and wait with anticipation...

What follows is a review of AMALUNA in its current, pre-"fixated" form, as presented under the Grand Chapiteau on Friday, April 20<sup>th</sup> and Saturday, April 21<sup>st</sup> 2012.



## Music

Composers by Bob & Bill (Guy Dubuc (Gee Doo-BOOK) and Marc Lessard (Mark Less-ARD)) are known for their ability to blur the lines between genres and styles to create an intricately woven visual style (think Koozâ). Their mission here was to create a "unique, raw sound; to surprise by means of the unexpected" and they've done just that. Guitars are very present and the overall sound is resolutely contemporary. Bass, drums, cello, vocals, keyboards, and percussion support the guitars in delivering the music directly without embellishment. "We wanted to unleash the power in the raw state that artists and musicians bring to the stage," explain Bob & Bill. The musicians share the stage with acrobats at times, which combines perfectly with the energy of the score. Amaluna is the first Cirque du Soleil show with an all-female group of musicians. "We wanted to reflect the guts and intense attitude of these musicians through the music itself," they add. Although their choice in accompaniments might be polarizing (the all-female band gives the music that Joan Jet "rock on!" feeling, which is just fine with me), the comparison at times to "game music" might be a turn-off to some.

## The Acts

Animation, or pre-show, can take the form of characters milling through the crowd crying over their dead friend (a la Corteo), a delivery man in search of his charge (as in Koozâ), mysterious characters guarding their mystifying void (as in KÂ), bugs from the microcosm swarming the big top (OVO), or clowns pointing unwitting attendees to their seats (as in Mystère, La Nouba, and a variety of other shows). For AMALUNA, while the percussionist and guitarist strum and pound a tribal beat, a number of plumed peacocks, leathered-hide lizards and various warriors of the island make their appearance and slink, strut and sashay about: There is Deeda, a clown dressed in yellow (she's Miranda's Nurse, played by Pepa Plana from Spain), who runs about wondering why people aren't taking their seats. Another, lizard-bound Cali, meanders his way through the crowd, flicking his tail here and there before climbing a mast and proceeding to dump popcorn on select guests beneath him. Other androgynous Peacock characters strut about tickling unsuspecting guests with their feathers in hand.

Suddenly Deeda walks on stage; all eyes are drawn to her as she welcomes us to the show - "Ladies à ladies, mesdames et mesdames, senoritas y senoras" - then takes us through the rules of the house: should there be a "petit problème"? "NO PANIC!" Should there be a bigger problem... well, whatever! Also "no foto, no texto, no facebook, no youtube, no, no, no, no, no!" (You know the drill). When a cell phone rings out in the audience, Deeda frowns and taps her foot, then goes to fetch it. After Deeda answers the call and speaks to the caller, she places the confiscated phone in a plastic bag then stuffs the entire kit-and-caboodle in a pouch along her waist. We've been warned!

The lights dim...

MAGIC PAGEANT (OPENING):



As the first few chords of electric guitar ring out, the lights gently rise and wash over a "shimmering, ethereal cloud of diaphanous red gossamer" as it dances in the air at Prospera's command. Prospera, the island's matriarch, comes toward the diaphanous filament as it glides and twirls before us like an expectant flame filled with desire, allowing its fingers to caress her, spill over her, and envelop her with its warmth. Prospera accepts its gifts readily, wrapping the ethereal flame about her as those in her charge - Amazonians, Peacocks, Fairies, and Valkyries - encircle her and move about in a slow ritualistic tribal dance; then come alive as Miranda, Prospera's daughter, joins them. This pageant is Prospera's gift to Miranda, to mark her passage

into womanhood. The peacocks strut their stuff, fanning their magnificent feathers for all the world to see; the Amazonians flex their muscles, holding up their spears in defiance ready to attack; the Water Fairies flit about, ready to play; the Valkyries fly in, prepared to defend the island from outsiders, and the Moon Goddess (played by Marie-Michelle Faber) descends from her crescent throne from above, ready to bless the ceremony to come.



The peacock costumes are made up of 14 layers of heat-pleated materials trimmed in leather and stretch metallic fabric, according to materials provided by Cirque. The tails open out to a "fan" of eight feet with hydraulic pistons that compensate for their weight. Made in the same proportion to the performers' bodies as the bird's fans have to theirs, the tails are attached to the artists with belts that hide the mechanisms under embroidered feathers. The skeleton and leaves of the fans are made of the same Fiberglass material used in the manufacture of fishing rods, and screen-printed metallic paper is glued to the leaves to recreate the iridescent look of peacock plumage, which shimmers in the spotlights.

Prospera's flame is created with nothing more than strategically placed fans - one built into the center of the stage floor and others placed around it - to create a swirling vortex of wind that keeps the scarf floating without effort (most of the time). It is one of the quietest, but most poignant openings I've seen in a long time and I love it.

#### UNICYCLES:

Fast and furiously two young Arielles from Japan (Satomi and Yuka Sakaino) peddle their way across the stage in quick form, weaving in and out of each other's paths like the wind as they joyfully pirouette, dance and thrill the pageant participants. Their infectious smiles and quick-on-their-seat movements continue the energy of the show's opening, not to mention a number of fast-paced spins, walks and rubberized twists that make watching this duo spin about the stage a pleasure. The costumes of the two unicyclists are fitted with cages that hide their legs, in a reference to the aesthetics of the Spanish Golden Age. The cages (with a diameter of five feet and a height of two-and-a-half feet) are made of perforated material (which includes Kevlar – a thermoplastic polymer – and gold leaf) to allow the artists to see the unicycle seats. However, for better visual reference, the cages are like the hoop skirt of Alegría's White Singer. During their act the cages break into two pieces, announcing the start of the storm after which the budding love between Miranda and her suitor will be tested.



#### WATER METEOR & ICARIAN GAMES:



Combine the cuteness of Varekai's Water Meteor trio with the acrobatic dedication of the same show's Icarian Games troupe and you get this amazing number. Here the female body becomes catapult and catcher in an elaborate, explosive and highly choreographed presentation of strength, balance and agility, all while keeping their water meteors (not filled with water, sadly) whirling through the air with impressive agility. Towers? No problem.

Leaping from porter to porter? No problem. Taking off from platforms of upturned feet? No problem. How about leaping through someone else's legs? Sure! It all comes to a surreal close as the lights dim and the water meteors glow!

#### THE STORM / AERIAL STRAPS:

While Miranda plays catch with Cali (who later steals her ball and transforms it into a red balloon that floats away), Prospera begins directing the heavens around her. She's about to summon the storm that will bring men to her island from lands far away; ascending the heavens via the Moon Goddesses crescent throne to do so. As the storm rages around us, the God and Goddess of the Wind perform an intense midair ballet on straps, "coming together and parting, intertwining their



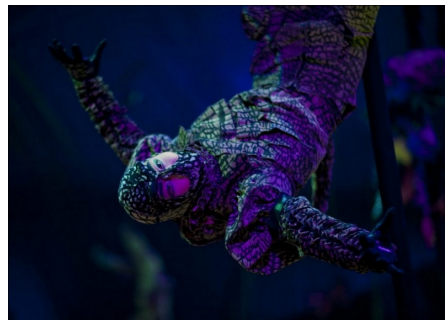
bodies and gliding through space in vigorous, frenetic movements." Shades of blue and green mix with shades of sky and sea to compose a soothing palette of sophistication belling the harshness to come, as their muscular bodies crash together in an erotic clash of raw power and sexuality.

As the storm subsides, Prospera and Deeda (Miranda's nurse), look over the gaggle of men who - captured by a net - wash ashore. At first the two chuckle as the men bumble and fumble over one another in a futile attempt to extricate themselves from their imprisonment; however, when one particularly striking young man (Romeo) catches the eye of Miranda, time seems to stand still; Prospera's enigmatic expression betrays little and Miranda is whisked away...



#### **SUSPENDED POLES / PAON DANCE:**

Undaunted by the turn of events, Romeo leaves his clan in search of Miranda. His path becomes treacherous as he enters an enchanted forest of strangely shaped trees (poles), some of which seem to descend from the heavens without form. As creatures of various dimension twist and twirl on these Chinese-pole inspired apparatuses, Romeo attempts to push through. Just when he thinks all hope is lost he comes upon the white Peacock Goddess (Amy McClendon), dancing gracefully in her dazzling white dress. For a moment Romeo stands mesmerized and though he is tempted by her seductive dance, he turns and leaves... his heart yearning for another.



#### JEEVES AND DEEDA:

Jeeves, the Captain of the rag-tag crew of men (although according to Cirque he's Romeo's "manservant"), pushes through a clearing in search of Romeo but finds little clue of him. In the process he runs into a small band of creatures that scare him, but are equally curious of the newcomer; they follow him wherever he goes.

Frightened, he attempts to escape by climbing a nearby tree but can barely muster the strength to pull up his girth. The forest creatures help him, but this only elicits a yelp of surprise - which attracts the attention of Deeda, who just so happened to be walking nearby. She spots the Sea-Captain and attempts to help. When he cries out at her and she tells him "NO PANIC" the two regard one another honestly for the first time. Deeda is enamored as Jeeves introduces himself and the two become lost in a tickle-fest (fantasy sex scene), which ends rather hilariously when Jeeves falls asleep.



#### HOOPS / WATERBOWL:

As shooting stars rain down from above, the Waterbowl is pushed to center-stage and the Moon Goddess - clinging to a simple steel hoop - descends from above. The Waterbowl resembles a giant, clear gemstone set in a ring of stylized organic shapes that evokes a vortex captured in time. As it interacts with the lighting, this "jewel" changes its appearance and aura, much like a precious stone. As the Moon Goddess sings to Miranda, who is watching from the cover of darkness (bestowing her blessing with her haunting song), she soars around the water bowl in this fantastic Aerial Hoop number. Later, as she tires, the Goddess calls for Miranda to join her and the two rise into the heavens as one, before Miranda drops into the water bowl in a gleeful splash of happiness. She cavorts about the waters cheerfully, rising to the surface to balance herself on the bowl's edge (and on specially designed canes) in a fantastic display of strength, flexibility, equilibrium and sensuality. Her energetic and joy-filled display of sinuous sexuality catches Romeo's eye. And later when he joins her in the water, she kisses him and the two seemingly become one.



#### UNEVEN BARS:

Cali, who is jealous of this new suitor, has seen their tentative kiss and slinks away to plot Romeo's downfall. Meanwhile, the men are now found to be the captives of the island's native Amazons, who pounce around and shout battle cries to ward off any who might interfere (or attempt to attack). Although the men think they're in heaven - and will show up the girls with their skills - these fighters are preparing the ultimate display of agility, skill and flair through the use of Uneven Bars. As they fly about their encumbered home, the men get their come-uppance and find they aren't the strongest creatures on this island. Inspired by Asia Minor, the corseted costumes of the Amazon warriors (High Bars) are augmented with ponytails and high-heeled black leather boots in a look that is more fantasy than historical reality, although they don't perform with their tails on.



INTERMISSION.

#### **TEETERBOARD:**

The boys, in their Renaissance-style denim doublets, find themselves fenced in and launch themselves high into the air, twisting and turning in a playful high-speed attempt to escape. Starting out like a traditional Korean Plank number, these boys fly, flip, twist and turn head-over-heels before landing on the wooden plank beneath them. However, as their desperation to be free grows, so do the risks they take - such as landing in a handstand on another performer's upturned palms, leaping onto a nearby platform set askew, and onto the shoulders of their peers through this showcase of power and energy. Truly an action packed and highly skilled act presented as never before!



#### **MANIPULATION:**

In "Sanddorn Balance" (sand and thorn), a truly breathtaking experience unfolds. Lara Jacobs Rigolo, Balance Goddess, uses thirteen palm leaf ribs to build a fragile, giant mobile - a sculpture consisting of a number of rods, from which weighted objects or further rods hang. The objects hanging from these ribs demonstrate the Greek mathematical Principle of the Lever, balancing each other so that the rods remain more or less horizontal, but never falling (or so we hope!)



Presented in a slow, suspenseful build, we can only sit and watch in awe as Lara grabs each rib with her toes and gently balances her growing sculpture upon it, her head, and later a stand above her head! (Her mobile serves as inspiration for the hanging lamps throughout the big top). An ode to balance, her movements are slow, deliberate and almost meditative as she concentrates all her attention on this literally breathtaking structure. And when she removes the smallest piece everything disintegrates and the young couple's trials begin: will Romeo fight for Miranda?



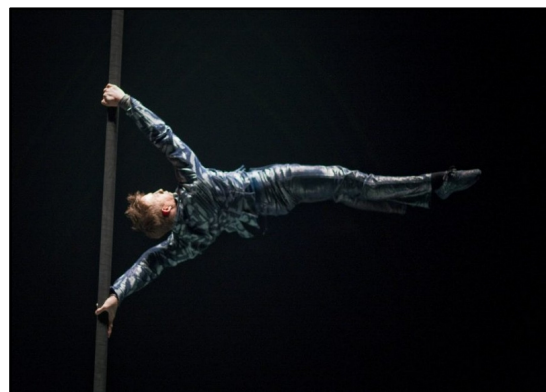
#### THOUSAND ARMS / CHINESE POLE:



While Prospera retires following the intense balancing act, Miranda stays with Romeo; however, the island works hard to keep the two apart by forming a highly impenetrable wall of moving bodies. Inspired by an Indonesian ritual dance, an ominous company of dancers dressed in black and silver performs a choreography that creates an indelible image of one woman with a thousand arms. Through much perseverance, the two unite. But their moment is short-

lived as The Peacock Goddess reappears in an ominous guise and steals Miranda away, sending her into the skies while a forest of sticks inspired by Vietnamese circus tradition springs up to create a portal to the Underworld through which Romeo must pass.

Undaunted, but tiring of the chase, Romeo climbs upward (using a single Chinese Pole) in a continuing search for his love. Édouard Doye's single pole act is half dance, half traditional Chinese Pole; he cavorts around the pole seductively, using his strength and agility to climb after his beloved. After a number of setbacks (precariously falling to the stage before stopping himself mere centimeters from the stage floor), he escapes.



#### JEEVES AND DEEDA DEUX:



When we were last graced with their presence, Jeeves was attempting to woo Deeda with his relatively poor singing and instrument playing abilities. Although she showed him up with a little Spanish flair, Jeeves succeeded to court Deeda. Here she shows up happy and pregnant! When her time to deliver comes - "Ay! ... Ay!Ay!" - they become giddy. So happy in fact they celebrate with a belly bump that serves to break Deeda's water (which they simulate rather humorously).

With the baby now on the way hilarity ensues: Jeeves rushes off simulating the cries of an ambulance in transit and brings a gurney upon which to carry Deeda. And after putting up rubbery legs (to help simulate stirrups but not taking the reality of the process too far), out pops the child - an American football with a little clown nose. The two, happy with their new progeny, begin to play... tossing her into the air and back and forth to each other... getting further and further away until the baby falls to the stage; but she's okay. Then - "Ay! ... Ay!Ay!" - Deeda goes back into labor and another baby pops out, this one with a long stylized moustache like his father. Before the new parents can enjoy their second child Deeda's labor continues on and on and on! Now overwhelmed by a crying hoard of children, the clown pair takes to the audience in an attempt to elicit their assistance with keeping them quiet (by singing "Rock-a-bye baby" to them)! It doesn't work...

#### TIGHTWIRE:

Returning to the action, we find four artists representing lost lovers in Purgatory. These fil-de-fer specialists take action and walk across their precarious ropes with comfort and ease. In what appears to be homage to the roaring twenties, two men and two women take to the ropes displaying an escalating array of balancing and maneuvering skills: some flips, some leaps, bounces and even walking the ropes in high heels and en-pointhe in ballet shoes! By the end of the performance both Romeo and Miranda find one another, but on opposite sides of the mountain top. They attempt to reach each other by crossing a rope but Cali, who is waiting in the wings, grabs Romeo and sends him back down to Earth!



#### JUGGLING:



Miranda's pool once again takes center stage, becoming both Romeo's watery prison and Cali's stage upon which he will celebrate his victory over his rival by displaying his manipulation prowess. Cali also shows us to what lengths he will go to keep Miranda for himself: he transforms into a human by ripping off his tail and shedding his reptilian-like hide! Here Viktor Kee juggles his charges with amazing speed and skill, showcasing a variety of imaginative ways in which to juggle any number of balls. Although Kee re-uses a number of moves from his act as it appeared in 1999's Dralion, there are a number of new manipulations and twists upon older maneuvers that will simply mesmerize you. (How about juggling a fireball? YES!)

By the end of this awesome display Cali is sure he has succeeded in thwarting his rival, as Romeo has found his way out of the waterbowl, lying lifeless before it. But Miranda does not accept this fate. She uses the power of the gemstone the Moon Goddess had given her and revives her suitor, while taking the will and power away from Cali at the same time.



#### AERIAL STRAPS:



With Cali now under Romeo's restraint, a quartet of Valkyries fly in and take Cali away, leaping and flying through the air with glee. Keeping in tight formation, these women show us not only how hard it is to soar through the big top without a care in the world, but equally how easy it is to do so... if we only tried. With all trials and tribulations passed, Prospera welcomes the union of Romeo and Miranda with open arms,

blesses their wedding, and allows all the personages of the island (and the audience) to celebrate right along with them.

#### AMALUNA!





As soon as the celebration settles and the lights softly rise our attention is once again drawn to Prospera, standing alone at the center of the stage where we first found her and the dancing flame. She steps into a swirling vortex of wind that at first gently raises the scarf about her, then more forcefully until it becomes parted from her. Prospera steps back, allowing the scarf to once again flit its mesmerizing dance before her...

The lights dim... THE END.

### /// IN CONCLUSION

I had an amazing experience with AMALUNA, more amazing than any touring show premiere that had come before. Whereas with Varekai (my prior high point) I came away thinking, "I really like this show" (and still do), I came out of AMALUNA thinking, "I LOVE this show!"



And I shocked my friends too, because I didn't really like the show the first night. Sure, I enjoyed it and some of its acrobatic elements, but overall Amaluna didn't "speak" to me, nor seem to hold a candle to some of Cirque's more sophisticated offerings, such as Quidam, Alegria, Mystere, "O" or ZED. Then something strange and amazing happened: as we assembled for the performance the following afternoon, I grew more and more excited about seeing it again.

Then as I sat, allowing the opening moments of the show to wash over me, something clicked. I don't know why and I don't think I could ever explain it succinctly beyond: I "got" it. I got the show, what it was attempting to say, how the music was used, and all the visionary elements the creators stirred into it. And then I fell in love with the whole kit-and-caboodle, grinning like a slack-jawed idiot.

It's uncanny, and welcome. I feel enlightened, invigorated and hungry for more. I revel in the energy of the Uneven Bars and Teeterboard numbers, find myself on the edge of my seat during Manipulation, loved watching Miranda playfully splashing about in her pool, and awed at the raw power clashing in the first aerial straps piece. There's very little that I dislike about the show. However, that being said, I'm not very fond of the Suspended Poles / Paeon dance piece, as I think it brings the energy of the show down (the dance itself is beautiful, but following a rather non-existent acrobatic number - the suspended poles - leaves the audience wanting, in my opinion).

Otherwise, the acts featured in the show are top-notch and innovative - especially the energy and skill of the Korean Plank/Teeterboard number and the relatively new-to-Cirque discipline of Uneven Bars (although similar to Tournik from Corteo and Carpace/Bars from TOTEM). The one thing this show does lack (and thankfully so) is technology: there's very little tech in the set or on the stage. Where you'll find it, though, is above your head in the "carousel", which brings in the "quirky" poles in the suspended pole number and the strap artists. Otherwise AMALUNA is classic set design in the strictest sense: less is more.

With Cirque stumbling in the last few years from its grand successes of the past - with mediocre show concept and over-expansion, Iris, Totem and now Amaluna mark a welcome trend. As such I urge you to see the show in Montréal or other cities on its tour (currently including Quebec City, Toronto and Vancouver) if you can - you won't regret it!



APRIL 2014

## « KURIOS: Reality is Relative! »

Cirque du Soleil Meets Steampunk

Those of you who've met me know I am a champion for experiencing the premiere of a new Cirque du Soleil show amongst the hometown crowd. There's absolutely no substitute for being in the stands of the Grand Chapiteau with a couple-thousand Québécois, clapping and stomping to the show's beat, having a marvelous time celebrating the birth of a new show together. It's a magical, enlightening sentiment you can't get anywhere else - except in Cirque's hometown.

Traveling to Montréal for premiere weekend has provided many indelible memories for me. My inaugural experience with this brand of euphoria came with witnessing Varekai's birth in 2002. I knew from the moment I stepped foot on the cobblestoned streets of the venerable old port that this was how you celebrated Cirque du Soleil, and I wanted to be a part of it from then on. Therefore, I repeated the experience with about a hundred other fans by co-organizing (and attending) CirqueCon 2005 for Corteo's premiere, met friends here again for 2007's Koozâ, 2009's OVO, 2010's Totem (for CirqueCon 2010), and 2012's premiere of Amaluna.

This year I joined "The Cirquesters", a rag-tag band of passionate fans and friends that have stuck together in the wake of CirqueCon's hiatus, the fan-gathering where most of us met. We aren't your average fan of Cirque du Soleil, of course. Didn't I say passionate? Being together again was good fun! And as a special treat, my wife chose to accompany me for the very first time, so she too got to experience the excitement of premiere. So, how did she like KURIOS - Cabinet of Curiosities?

She loved it - and so did I! But we'll get to the show in a moment...

### /// MONTRÉAL ROADTRIP

Our adventure began the morning of Friday, April 25<sup>th</sup> rather early, as we needed to get to the airport, board our flight, and arrive in New York's JFK Airport by Noon so that our friends, Douglas and Mary Metzger (who live on Long Island), could pick us up and whisk us all out of the city and away to Lake Placid by car. Why Lake Placid you might ask? Well, it's a decent spot more than half-way between New York City and Montréal, and it's a place Doug & Mary have a home-away-from-home we could all sleep at for the night, making the road trip a little more bearable. And without a hitch, everything this morning went as planned, including our deli lunch-n-go on the road that we'd spoken about just days prior. Say what you will, but, a sandwich is not just a sandwich in New York City!



We had all the fix'ins too: selection of meats, cheeses, condiments, slaw, salads and even cookies - a regular smorgasbord on wheels!

Although most of the road trip was via highways, there were a couple of interesting spots we got to see along the way.

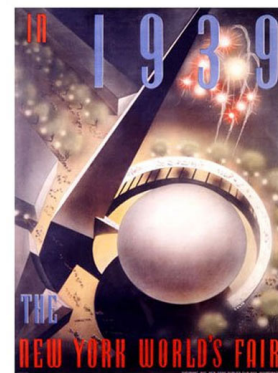


Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, often referred to as Flushing Meadows Park, or simply Flushing Meadows, was one of those interesting spots. Located in the borough of Queens, you'll find it between the Van Wyck Expressway and Grand Central Parkway, and stretching between Flushing Bay (at the southern edge of LaGuardia Airport) to Union Turnpike at the North. It contains the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, the current venue for the U.S. Open tennis tournament; Citi Field, the home of the New York Mets baseball team; the New York Hall of Science, the Queens Museum of Art, the Queens Theatre in the Park, the Queens Wildlife Center, and the New York State Pavilion. It's actually the fourth largest public park in New York City! But as impressive as all that is... what caught our eye were the two "spaceship" towers from the 1964/1965 New York World's Fair (which were also featured heavily in the film "Men in Black" and "Iron Man 2").

While now a green-space and a location for many public venues, in the past it was a former dumping ground, characterized as "a valley of ashes" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. The site, known at the time as the Corona Ash Dumps, was being filled with refuse from coal-burning furnaces, as well as with horse manure and other rubbish of the day. It was later cleared to be the site for the 1939/1940 World's Fair. (The ash, consequently, was used to form the bases of the nearby Van Wyck Expressway running along the eastern side of the park, the nearby Interboro Parkway, and the Long Island Expressway that divides the park into north and south halves.)

Many countries around the world participated in the 1939/1940 World's Fair, and over 44 million people attended its exhibits before it was over. What made this particular fair special was its theme - it was the first exposition to be based on the future, beckoning visitors to take a look at "the world of tomorrow".

*The eyes of the Fair are on the future - not in the sense of peering toward the unknown nor attempting to foretell the events of tomorrow and the shape of things to come, but in the sense of presenting a new and clearer view of today in preparation for tomorrow; a view of the forces and ideas that prevail as well as the machines. To its visitors the Fair will say: "Here are the materials, ideas, and forces at work in our world. These are the tools with which the World of Tomorrow must be made. They are all interesting and much effort has been expended to lay them before you in an interesting way. Familiarity with today is the best preparation for the future."*



One of the first exhibits to receive attention was the Westinghouse Time Capsule, which was not to be opened for 5,000 years (the year 6939). The time capsule was a tube containing writings by Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann, copies of Life Magazine, a Mickey Mouse watch, a Gillette safety razor, a kewpie doll, a dollar in change, a pack of Camel cigarettes, millions of pages of text on microfilm, and much more. The capsule also contained seeds of foods in common use at the time: (wheat, corn, oats, tobacco, cotton, flax, rice, soy beans, alfalfa, sugar beets, carrots and barley, all sealed in glass tubes. Other exhibits included Vermeer's painting The Milkmaid from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, a streamlined pencil sharpener, a diner, a futuristic car based city by GM and, of course, early televisions. There was also a huge globe/planetarium located near the center of the fair. Bell Labs' Voder, a keyboard-operated speech synthesizer, was also demonstrated at the Fair. Other firsts included color photography, nylon, air conditioning, fluorescent lamps, the View-Master, and Smell-O-Vision.

It was a heady time for American spirits, cut-short by American involvement in World War II, but never its prospects, which ultimately lead to the 1964/1965 Exposition.



The 1964/1965 New York World's Fair hailed itself as a "universal and international" exposition, the fair's theme was "Peace Through Understanding", dedicated to "Man's Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe"; American companies dominated the exposition as exhibitors and it's best remembered as a showcase of mid-20th-century American culture and technology. The nascent Space Age, with its vista of promise,

was well represented [a 2-acre park sponsored by NASA and the Department of Defense was on hand with a full-scale model of the F-1 engines of the first stage of a Saturn V, a Titan II booster with a Gemini capsule, an Atlas with a Mercury capsule, a Thor-Delta rocket, Aurora 7 (the Mercury capsule flown on the second US manned orbital flight), full-scale models of an X-15 aircraft, an Agena upper stage, a Gemini spacecraft, an Apollo command/service module, a Lunar Excursion Module, and replicas of unmanned spacecraft].

In many ways the fair symbolized a grand consumer show covering many products produced in America at the time for transportation, living, and consumer electronic needs in a way that would never be repeated at future world's fairs in North America. Most American companies from pen manufacturers to auto companies had a major presence. Many corporations demonstrated the use of mainframe computers, computer terminals with keyboards and CRT displays, Teletype machines, punch cards, and telephone modems in an era when computer equipment was kept in back offices away from the public, decades before the Internet and home computers were at everyone's disposal.

But perhaps more pointedly (for me), the Fair was also the venue Walt Disney used to design and perfect his system of "Audio-Animatronics", in which a combination of electromechanical actuators and computers controls the movement of lifelike robots to act out scenes. WED Enterprises designed and created four shows at the fair:

- In "Pepsi Presents Walt Disney's 'It's a Small World' - a Salute to UNICEF and the World's Children", animated dolls and animals frolicked in a spirit of international unity accompanying a boat ride around the world.
- General Electric sponsored "Progressland", where an audience seated in a revolving auditorium (the "Carousel of Progress") viewed an audio-animatronic presentation of the progress of electricity in the home. The Sherman Brothers song "There's a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow" was composed for this attraction.
- Ford Motor Company presented "Ford's Magic Skyway", featuring 50 actual (motorless) convertible Ford vehicles, including Ford Mustangs, in an early prototype of what would become the PeopleMover ride system. Audience members entered the vehicles on a main platform as they moved slowly along the track. The ride moved the audience through scenes featuring life-sized audio-animatronic dinosaurs and cavemen.
- At the Illinois pavilion, a lifelike President Abraham Lincoln, voiced by Royal Dano, recited his famous speeches in "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln".

After the fair, there was some discussion of the Disney Company retaining these exhibits on-site and converting Flushing Meadows Park into an East Coast version of Disneyland, but this idea was abandoned. Instead, Disney relocated several of these exhibits to Disneyland in Anaheim, California and subsequently replicated them at other Disney theme parks. Today's Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida is essentially the realization of the original concept of an "East Coast Disneyland" with Epcot Center designed as a "permanent" world's fair.

It was amazing even to catch a glimpse of where all this happened.

Of course, we were in for quite a treat when we finally arrived in Lake Placid too. Back in 1980, it was home to the Winter Olympics; many of its venues can still be found - and are still in use - today, such as The Cauldron (where the flame was kept), the Ski-Jump Complex, the Luge area, and the Olympic Center where the United States men's ice hockey team, composed mostly of collegiate players, performed a "miracle on ice". They were not predicted to advance beyond group play, but, ended up defeating the heavily favored Soviet team and Finland in the medal round to win the gold medal. The United States team's 4-3 win over the Soviet team, which came into the 1980 Games having won 4 consecutive Olympic gold medals, became known as the "Miracle on Ice" in the US press. The win captured the hearts of Americans during a time of Cold War tensions, even though it was the win against Finland that captured the gold medal.





Still... it's amazing considering that many of the venues you'll find here were built for the 1932 Winter Olympics, which Lake Placid hosted. And, according to Doug, there's talk of having Lake Placid host again sometime since all the facilities are here. Wouldn't that be something?

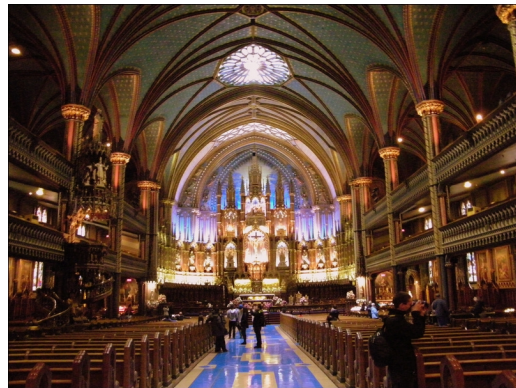
You know what else is something? There's a Howard Johnson's Restaurant in Lake Placid, can you believe that? And we had breakfast there the following morning - I insisted!

Howard Johnson's is a chain of hotels, motels and restaurants located primarily throughout the United States and Canada. Founded by Howard Johnson, it was the largest restaurant chain in the US throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with more than 1,000 combined company-owned and franchised outlets. For those who grew up during that time you know it was a powerhouse! Today, Howard Johnson hotels and motels (HOJO) are now part of Wyndham Worldwide brands and are sprinkled about here and there. The company's restaurants, which were franchised separately from the hotel brand and were just as prevalent (if not more so), are rarely seen today. In fact, there are only two HOJO restaurants in business today... this one here in Lake Placid, NY and one in Bangor, Maine!

In my youth we frequented both Howard Johnson motels and restaurants. In fact, there was a HOJO-branded restaurant in my hometown the first few years we lived there, but it's long since gone. To see one, now, in operation tickled me so much I wanted to eat there just to say that I did. Who'd have thought you'd see one out here in the middle of upstate New York!?

Ehh, it wasn't bad.

It kept us going until we reached Montréal, at around 2:00pm. Once settled into our hotel (the Spring Hill Suites), we hit the cobble-stoned streets of the Old Port area with gusto, visiting a number of noted shops along the way (including, I might add, the infamous Maple store!) Included in our walkabout was a duck into the Notre Dame church.



### /// THE CIRQUESTERS

Eventually we all returned to our rooms to dry up (warm up and rest up) a bit, before meeting a few of the Cirquesters at Chez Suzette around 5:00pm for our impromptu Group Meal. Chez Suzette, as some might recall, is the creperie I was introduced to the first year I came to Montréal (2002, for the premiere of Varekai); I've come here every time since, sometimes multiple times! It was one of the first places I recommended when the question of where the group might meet for dinner

before the show went out. Luckily I got a second from Heather and Jim and so it was ordained! In attendance was Chris Gullick, Todd Krause, Nicole and I, Vince Kramer, Gena Colton, Doug & Mary Metzger, and Heather Smith & Jim Strain. We crammed into a large table on their second floor and had a grand time. Rodolfo Elizondo, Mexican fan extraordinaire, eventually showed up as well. Now it was a party!



And then we took the party to the Big Top.

### /// THE CIRQUE MEETS STEAMPUNK

From the moment Cirque began to tease KURIOS - CABINET DES CURIOSITÉS we could feel the new creation would be something different. Just how different we wouldn't know until the morning Cirque du Soleil revealed the unusual moniker and scenic elements for its newest touring production. The unveiling only compounded the teasing "glimpses" we were offered via YouTube in the days leading up to and after that reveal. And through them we understood the show existed in a world heavily influenced by Steampunk, but little did we know just how much of an influence the genre would have on the show's overall aesthetic. And that's not a bad thing!





Steampunk is defined as a sub-genre of science fiction that typically features steam-powered machinery, especially in a setting inspired by industrialized Western civilization during the 19th century. Works in this genre are often set in an alternative history of the British Victorian era or American "Wild West", in a post-apocalyptic future during which steam power has regained mainstream use, or in a fantasy world that similarly employs steam power.



Steampunk perhaps most recognizably features anachronistic technologies or retro-futuristic inventions as people in the 19th century might have envisioned them, and is likewise rooted in the era's perspective on fashion, culture, architectural style, and art. Such technology may include fictional machines like those found in the printed works of H. G. Wells ("The Time Machine", "War of the Worlds", "The Island of Doctor Moreau"), Jules Verne ("Journey to the Center of the Earth", "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", and "Around the World in Eighty Days"), and Mary Shelley ("Frankenstein"), the

modern authors Philip Pullman, Scott Westerfeld, Stephen Hunt and China Miéville, or filmed works of Fritz Lang ("Metropolis").

Other examples of Steampunk contain alternative history-style presentations of such technology as lighter-than-air airships, analog computers, or such digital mechanical computers as Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine. Steampunk may also incorporate additional elements from the genres of fantasy, horror, historical fiction, alternate history, or other branches of speculative fiction, making it often a hybrid genre.

Michele Laprise, the show's Writer and Director, chose this period and genre for inspiration because "it was a phenomenal time for humanity. People were travelling, they were dreaming of other worlds." And their lives were changing too, he pointed out, through the use of electricity, distances were shrinking as rail travel expanded and became faster, and people were able to communicate with each other quickly through the invention of the telegraph. "People were enthusiastic and they had the feeling that everything was possible," he said. "If people take that from our show, that everything in life, with your imagination, can become more interesting, can bring you close to another person, then I think we'll have succeeded."





The journey begins the moment you step onto the cobblestone-lined pathways of the Jacques Cartier Pier in the Vieux Port of Montréal, where Cirque du Soleil has staked its creations since the dawn of its recorded time (except for 1999's Dralion, which was set up on the lawn of their headquarters building in the City). Surrounded on all sides by either water or history the striped big top calls out to fans and friends alike. An archway with the show's image a few paces in - a new feature this year - beckons us forward.



An interesting looking contraption between the two entrance doorways summons us in even further. It's a bicycle-like contrivance upon second glance, with its mechanics firmly attached to a whirligig of some creation. Activating it with your own power sets the gears affixed into rotational motion, awarding the curios rider with a green clown nose courtesy of DES JARDINS, one of Cirque du Soleil's principle sponsors, from a

chute just to the rider's left.

Further inside, a little spheroid item cordoned off just to the right of Door #2, catches our attention. From a distance it appears to be a representation of the porthole shown to us in one of the "Glimpse of KURIOS" videos the creators circulated across its social media platforms. Upon closer inspection, it was much, much more than that: it was a house - in miniature! Included in this miniature house is an armchair, a chandelier as well as other essentials of a Victorian home. Whose house is it I wonder? Why it's Mini Lili (one of the show's characters), and she's at home!





Brought a little into the world of KURIOS then, it was time... Entering the Grand Chapiteau is always a treat. It's an oasis within the trappings of the real world in which we live, allowing ourselves to be instantly transported elsewhere, even if for a brief period of time. But when you step foot inside the big top of a new show for the first time, it's nothing short of magical. Parting through the canvas flaps and climbing the

steps into the seating area for the first time, your heart begins to race... your breathing becomes shallow... thoughts begin to transform and expectations run rampant, which only serves to fuel your euphoria and heighten the excitement further. It becomes difficult not to imagine what wonders await you as you reach the crest of the stairwell, craning your neck forward to get just a glimpse of what lays beyond. And then, viola! You're transported once again into another wondrous realm more fantastical than the last! C'est magnifique!

### **Story, Theme, Set & Stage**

There's an existential question we've all asked ourselves at one time or another, for one reason or another - *there must be something more, beyond all this; there can't just be this, can there?* But what if you *could* alter reality at will? In this alternate yet familiar past, a Seeker (Le Chercheur) is convinced that there exists a hidden, invisible world - a place where the craziest ideas and the grandest dreams lay waiting, and in order to glimpse the marvels that lie just below the surface, he reckons we must first learn to close our eyes.

Very inquisitive about these possibilities - curious even - the Seeker builds towering gadgets and powerful gizmos, bringing to life automatons of all shapes, sizes and functions in order to fuel his lofty investigations. And after hours and hours and hours of labor, he's come up with a few tantalizing answers to his questions: Yes! There is more to behold! In the narrative, as told by Laprise, Le Chercheur is on a quest. He

creates a machine to travel into another dimension to find the place where the possible and the impossible meet. Only his plan backfires. "The reverse happens," Laprise explains, "And we have people from the other dimension who come into his world and they transform his world into poetry."



The set design of KURIOS puts the spectator in a well-defined place: the curio cabinet of a Seeker filled with unusual objects collected on his travels. Set in what could be called a retro-future, in this parallel reality it is the steam engine and not the internal combustion engine that reigns supreme, evoking the start of the industrialization era, but as if science and technology had evolved differently and progress had taken on a more human dimension. "It's like Jules Verne meets [Nicola Tesla] in an alternate reality, out of time," explains Set Designer Stéphane Roy.

Roy, now working on his sixth Cirque du Soleil show, mentioned in an interview with the Montréal Gazette that Fellini's *La Strada* was an influence for his "copper-toned clockwork set, with its startling steam engine and quirky props." The 1900 Paris Exhibition, which honored the achievements of the 19th century, was important, too, because "it was when everything was invented for new communication and transportation," Roy said. "Trains, planes, electricity, telegrams. It was a moment in the history of mankind when communication just went bang, everything was exploding."

Kurios differs from other Cirque du Soleil shows, he said, because "in this one you're somewhere, you're in a house, you're in a room, in a space where things are happening." This home is packed with curios. When the numbers appear, "it's as if a jewel box is being opened," he added.

The performance space is dominated by two structures, referred to as "cabinets". One explores the topic of sound and the other the topic of electricity. Built by the Seeker using scraps and pieces collected over time, the two large towers also serve as "wave sensors" made from miscellaneous components such as gramophones, old typewriters, electrical bulbs and turbines. The two cabinets are attached to the main arch - another "wave sensor" - that dominates the stage. The opening at the center, at the back of the stage, evokes the mouth of a railroad tunnel through a mountain; it is mainly through this opening that artists move in and out of the spotlight and that equipment and props are taken on and off the stage. Above it sit the musicians.

The stage itself was lowered 35 cm and a bank was installed all around its lip (the bank is a 60-cm-wide raised walkway on which two rails are installed for transporting various props). Presented on their separate, distinct structures, the acts in the show represent the curios that jump to life inside the Seeker's workshop. "It's not only a stage," Roy said. "You're inside somebody's mind. It's kind of crazy!"

Thus, in the Seeker's larger-than-life curio cabinet, a collection of otherworldly characters suddenly steps into his makeshift mechanical world. When the outlandish, benevolent characters turn his world upside down with a touch of poetry and humor in an attempt to ignite the Seeker's imagination, his curios jump to life one by one before his very eyes. What if by engaging our imagination and opening our minds we could unlock the door to a world of wonders, a bridge to a new dimension, a magnetic portal to an invisible world? KURIOS immerses you in this mysterious and fascinating realm that disorients your senses and challenges your perceptions, leaving you to wonder: "Is it real, or just a figment of my imagination?" Step into the curio cabinet of an ambitious inventor who defies the laws of time, space and dimension in order to reinvent everything around him! And suddenly, the visible becomes invisible, perspectives are transformed, and the world is literally turned upside down in a place that's as beautiful as it is mysterious!





## /// ALL ABOARD!

Having settled in our seats now, and taken in the elaborately-themed, yet simply-constructed set, we begin to notice the goings-on on the stage and surrounding space. We find the two "cabinets" stationed stage-right and stage-left. To their immediate sides are two columns - the "wave sensors" (satellite dishes and other radar gathering machines) - which appear to have been built out of scraps. A time piece on the far wall, which just a moment ago read 11:07, now turns with a loud chime to 11:08. A number of Victrola-inspired gadgets surround the stage's thrust, which the Seeker buzzes around testing, calibrating. On another contraption, a cross between a gramophone and typewriter, he punches in a code, and then turns the lever to send his communication. Satisfied his message sent and received, he continues to ready his conveyance - a specially built chair standing 3.5 meters tall - for the journey he is preparing to take. Meanwhile, his Kurios robots are running amok in the audience, passing out pillows and blankets, and putting baby crib mobiles atop other's heads. The clock on the wall turns over another minute, now reading 11:09.

At 11:10, as the lights dim, you can sense the tension in the air - a shock of electric excitement permeates as any previous vociferations at the announcement the show is about to begin comes to a sharp end. Then a gentleman, using a rather interesting hybrid accordion-keyboarded contraption (with no less than three phonograph speakers attached to it), steps to the front of the stage, and through the manipulation of his contraption, announces the name of the spectacle...

The sound of a train whistle off in the distance pierces the darkness next, immediately followed by the powerful beam of a bright, white light - the train's headlight! As music begins to play (a funky fusion of jazz and electro-swing), the train peeks over the hill, and in an opening reminiscent of La Nouba's Festival of Characters, Alegría's "Milonga" Opening, and Varekai's Musician's Walk, artists spill into the big top. These are "The Travelers" (a miniature train atop their heads); they are accompanied by the show's musicians: Marc Sohier (Canada) - bandleader, bass, double bass; Michael Levin (USA) - cello, keyboards, Guitar; Paul Lazar (France) - Violins; Lidia Kaminska (Poland) - Accordion, Keyboard; Christopher "Kit" Chatham (USA) - Drums; Antoine Berthiaume (Canada) - Guitar; Christa Mercey (Canada) - Percussion), and Singer Eirini Tornosaki (Greece).

The train chugs through the big top - from one side to the other - on a journey we know not where... Or do we? Just where we'll have to wait and see! Once the train disappears around a bend in the tracks, our attention is returned to the Seeker (Anton Valen, from Spain), who is busy in his workshop making final adjustments to his equipment - connecting the chair to the electric dynamos, calibrating his sensitive aural receivers, checking the wave sensors for analogous readings, and sending one last communication: -- .-. -. . --- ... (K-U-R-I-O-S). Set, and ready to go, the Seeker hops into his chair. As the clock on the wall strikes 11:11, he flips the switch, sending his mechanical whirligigs into motion. But something unexpected happens... instead of transporting him to another world, it seems this other realm is about to come to him!

He hops out of his chair in shock, as the items in his workshop begin to spring into motion, taking on a life of their own. Twin manikins, which had up until then been standing off to the side lifeless, dance and flit about as if touched by madness. The Seeker's robots begin to swirl and twirl in confusion while electricity sparks through the lab's wave sensors, opening a portal high above them. Through this wormhole descends the portly Mr. Microcosmos (played by Karl L'Ecuyer, from Canada - previously a Cricket of OVO), Klara (Ekaterina Pirogovskaya, Russia - fans might remember her as "Violet" from IRIS) and Nico (played by Nico Baixas from Spain) - a.k.a. "The Visitors" - wearing intra-dimensional masks.

They remove their masks (discarding them into the belly of Mr. Microcosmos) and then turn their attention aft as Mr. Microcosmo's belly and coat unfolds into a locomotive (the very same from earlier; its structure, which extends out over a distance of 19-meters, is all aluminum. The outer shell is made out of mostly vinyl canvas with fiberglass mosquito screen used for windows.), which pulls right into the Seeker's Workshop, out of which emerges a swarm of travelers from the 19th Century...



Together with help of "The Travelers", a mélange of movement nothing less than a feast for the senses takes place before us. Everything is in continuous motion as Christa walks over chairs placed in her path, suitcases and tables become beat-boxes for both she and Kit, and all the while Gabriel juggles an ever increasing number of clubs. And when he flies up into the air - still juggling his clubs - we realize there's no stopping this train! It really is synchronized chaos and it's fantastic!

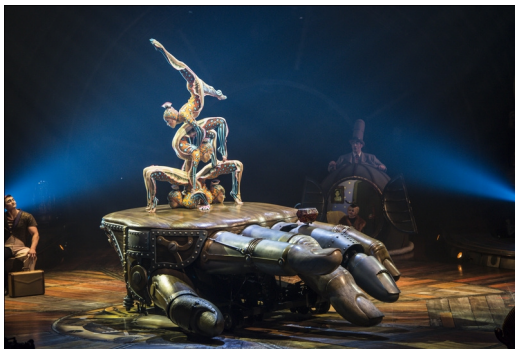


A giant leather chest is left behind as the Travelers bid us an enthusiastic adieu. It opens to reveal, encased in sumptuous Moroccan cushions, two characters that emerge from the box like Fabergé jewels, evoking a pair of wax dolls. (The cut of their costumes is inspired by early sportswear and vintage circus attire, and they seem almost out of place in this steampunky world until the doll context is understood. The materials, however, are quite modern and highly sophisticated - velour effects and imitation leather cuts in gold.)

The dolls (Ukrainian performers Roman and Lena Tereshchenko) then spring to life before our eyes to perform a rousing and dangerous Russian Cradle routine.



In a performance similar to Aerial Hoops (as seen in various Cirque du Soleil productions), the "Chandelier Lady" - Anne Weissbecker (France) - takes to the skies in her two-wheeled cycle to perform a wonderful routine of strength and movement. Then, KURIOS's resident clown - David-Alexandre Després from Canada - takes the stage, literally, with a routine some have come to love to hate: the Invisible Circus. The routine itself is rather pedantic - four invisible artists take the stage to perform a high-wire with unicycle act, a trapeze routine, teeterboard jumping (Rita & Cheetah), a high-dive into a bowl of water (Giuseppe), and leaping through a hoop set afire (Felippe, the lion), but it is humorous enough, and sure to please the kids in the audience.



A huge mechanical hand, weighing 340 kilograms and measuring 4.6-meters by 2.1-meters crawls upstage next. Operated by two artists using a pedal and gear mechanism, the all-fiberglass hand is an automaton built from various parts that look like wood, metal, marble and iron. Atop the structure four bendable ladies from, uhm, Russia (Ayagma Tsybenova, Lillia Zhambalova, Bayarma Zodboeva, Imin Tsydendambaeva), practice the extreme

physical discipline known as Contortion. Clothed to appear as Eels, they fold and contort their bodies into various mind-bending poses. Appearing in their third Cirque du Soleil show - having first appeared in Banana Shpeel and later IRIS - these ladies perform a stimulating routine fans of these two previous shows will undoubtedly remember.

The metal hand is replaced with a dinner table, set with all the finery, replete with guests taking in a meal and conversation. Although what they are conversing about is unknown to us, it quickly becomes apparent that one of the dinner guests is boasting about his ability to catch the chandelier one of the magicians has set aloft by balancing the chairs around the dinner table. Fans of Cirque du Soleil will recognize this equilibrist as none other than Cuban-born Carlos Rokardy, formerly of La Nouba and Viva Elvis. His routine here is similar to his performance in both shows, building chairs ever higher to catch the floating chandelier. Only - look up - he's not alone!



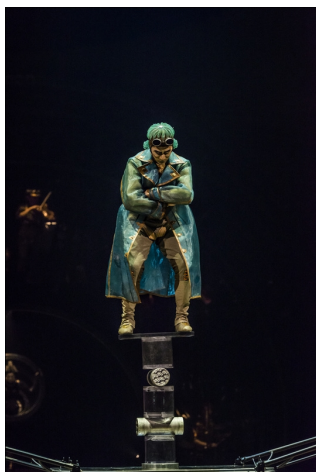


This number is referred to as the "upside-down dinner scene" for a reason, for above Rokardy, another dinner is taking place with another balancer stacking chairs - only in reverse! Counterweights were attached to parts of the costume worn by the artist hanging from the chandelier to create the impression that gravity has been reversed. These counterweights work like roly-poly toys - tilting dolls that have a weight inside the

bottom and wobble back to an upright position when pushed. It's a fantastic twist to what's become a Cirque du Soleil staple performance.

He's followed up with Rola Bola, one of this production's centerpieces.

"It's the only act of rola bola aerial of its kind in the world," said Michel Laprise in an interview with the Montréal Gazette. "When I was presented that act by Casting I said: 'we do everything to get this guy.'" And so they did. The "guy" is James Eulises Gonzalez Correa, a native of Colombia who has performed all over the world. And his act is simply breathtaking.



Gonzalez personifies The Aviator (you can spot him throughout various scenes wearing a gold-lined, translucent aqua-colored overcoat, aviator goggles and appropriate leather head-gear. And in the opening of the show, flinging far-traveling paper airplanes into the crowd), man's dream and ambition of achieving mechanical flight; he makes his approach upstage (quite literally) in a boxy winged aircraft of his own design. As he lands, he transforms his aircraft into a performance space where he first balances upon a bowling ball, then ever-increasing (and rotating) cylinders. And just when you think he couldn't up the difficulty, he returns to the air, all the while balancing on his rolas... Finally, the Seeker joins us briefly once again, riding a rocket-fueled version of his chair into the higher elevations. Where he (and we) will end up next is for discovery after Intermission!

Now up high above the ground, the Seeker (and by extension us) catch a glimpse of the mischievous behaviors that occur in the heavens of this retro-futuristic realm. On a sea of clouds, friendly rainbows cast fishing lines into a sea stocked with spirited fry. The "fish" creatures utilize specialized trampoline techniques, and double-bouncing skills to send members of their "school" sailing high. A play on the dynamics of a typical backyard trampoline, requiring two people- one person jumping, the other person(s) standing near the outer springs, ready to initiate the double bounce at the appropriate moment.

At a certain point in the air (timing is crucial, but relative to the individuals taking part), the person standing off to the side stomps down near the landing area of the trampoline just as the jumper comes in. The initial stomp and landing results in more force being applied downward than the jumper is able to initiate on his/her own. When successful, the jumper will be propelled significantly higher than usual.

Exuberant, fun-filled leaps ensue, delighting the audience as these "fish" dance atop the cloud-waves. With a humorous nudge to modern technology, a few performers grab wakeboarding handles and leap into the air, appearing as if they are speeding through the surf behind a speedboat, flailing and kicking. Yet, as all fun beach days must, this winds down to an end, and the net begins to sag to the stage



surface, and our new friends return to their other form as fish, flopping on dry land. Consequently, the costumes are an illusion to the way film director Georges Méliès imagined Martians; hence you'll find a number of these performers - Victor Degtyarev (Russia), Arnaud Gaizergues (France), Nathan Dennis (Australia), Karl L'Ecuyer (Canada), Mathieu Hubener (France), Ryan Murray (USA) - with the scales as well as fin and fishtail grafts.

While the Acro Net is being secured away by a handful of stage-hands (which are quite noticeable Cirque, fix that), our intrepid comedian/mime is working the stands looking for an unsuspecting audience member to be his date for the evening. Once selected, he ushers her to the front of the stage, dropping her at his "front door", and waits inside on his two-seater couch for her to ring his doorbell. Once welcomed inside and seated on the couch, he becomes "smitten" and nervous as if he's a young man on his first date. He fidgets helplessly, and then remembers dancing is the popular thing and goes to turn on his radio. It shocks him as he does so, sending him into a whirlwind of electronica-induced dance moves and Velociraptor impersonations (he really sells those Velociraptor stomps!) After a few moments the odd behavior wears off and he returns to her side on the couch, unawares anything is wrong. A moment or two passes and he then remembers that he has yet to offer her a beverage, so he rises once again to get one.

While he is "out of the room", she is "visited" by his "pet bird" - played by him. While the bird is busy head bobbing, whistles and attempts to woo her, the "cat" catches the bird, turning it into nothing more than a handful of feathers. The cat then takes what he feels his is rightful place on the couch, preening and kneading - generally making the audience member slightly uncomfortable. What follows is a predictable, but hilarious, exhibit of cat behavior from ignoring its owner to using the litter box, but when he "coughs up a furball" the entire big top dissolves into sheer hysteria! The icing on the cake is a laser pointer's light pointed at the chest of the already uncomfortable audience member with a cat ready to pounce!

The routine ends when the cat, stretched out on the back of the couch, falls off the back, heralding the return of our now human mime with drinks in hand.

The tempo slows following the energetic Acro Net performance with a scene denoted as "Hands Continent". The mechanical hand seen earlier returns accompanied by a hot-air balloon reminiscent of The Cloud from Varekai. The hot-air balloon used in this scene is made of fabric and has a built-in blower system. The gondola is made of metal and tulle. It serves as a projection screen 4.3-meters in diameter, which Nico the Accordion Man uses to show us his fantastic finger puppetry. Using his fingers as the puppets legs for walking, Nico takes us along a smaller-scale (literally and figuratively) journey of friendship and success. Our small puppet companion begins to travel, meeting a partner along the way. The two travel together, overcoming small obstacles, reminiscent of the first half of the show.

As the puppet show progresses, our "two-legged" protagonist portrays another type of journey, presumably held very close to the hearts of all Cirque du Soleil performers - a journey from humble beginnings within their respective specialist (in this case, dance), through trials, and resulting in a coveted role in a circus show. From then on, the puppet act extends into the audience via a small hot-air balloon carrying our protagonist. The camera, now hand-held, leads the balloon into the audience, where our puppet friend settles into a relaxing life in a beach setting - atop the (un?)fortunate head of a probably-balding audience member. Complete with beach towel, umbrella, and his long-traveled companion, arm-in-arm, our small character interacts with the audience in what very much resembles something you would expect from Blue Man Group- quirky, and successfully breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall in a way only a stage show can.

In a performance that would have most definitely been The Atherton Twins' had they stuck with the show, two brothers (Roman and Vitali Tomanov, from the US) perform an amazing new Aerial Straps routine in their stead. Consisting of two thin parallel straps several meters in length, along which the acrobat rolls and unrolls using the wrists and arms to execute rises, falls and acrobatics, all the while suspended. The aerial straps artists perform on a gigantic "drop of mercury" made entirely of fiberglass and covered in silver leaf.

This character, made of two conjoined twins, is named Jean-Claude (presumably, "Jean" and "Claude"), have been visible throughout the entire show so far, joined at the hips. Their gait is well-practiced, almost an optical illusion, as their legs swing in opposing, yet, synchronous patterns. They move fluidly about the stage, adept and elegant; however, during the aerial act, the two brothers part, sailing in opposing directions from each other, separate entities for the first time in their lives. They land, and stop to admire their legs, being able to see the other side of their bodies as never before.





The act continues as a celebration of freedom, but soon evidence of unrest becomes apparent. A hint of competition or disagreement begins between the two brothers - perhaps they worked better as a team after all. More flying follows, fantastic acrobatic feats of strength and coordination, until both brothers land, side-by-side again, back on the mercury drop, their own small "Microcosmos". Wrapping their arms around each other's backs, they seem to choose to become conjoined again, returning to their state of teamwork and agreement.



Last, but certainly not least, is one of Cirque du Soleil's best acrobatic numbers in my opinion, the Banquine! For those unawares, Banquine is an acrobatic discipline normally executed at ground level by two carriers who, using their arms, catapult a flyer to stand on the interlaced hands of the carriers, a position called banquette. The impetus allows the flyer to perform acrobatic leaps and return to the starting point,

the ground, or the banquette of a second team of carriers. It seems simple enough but Cirque du Soleil has elevated this discipline into an art form, as seen in Quidam and Journey of Man; Banquine returned to the Cirque fold in ZED and Viva Elvis, and can currently be seen in ZARKANA at Aria in Las Vegas.

Fans of Cirque du Soleil will recognize the names of many of the performers here - Nikolay Astashkin (Russia), Andrii Bondarenko (Ukraine), Ekaterina Evdokimova (Russia), Roman Kenzhayev (Kazakhstan), Elena Kolesnikova (Russia), Sergey Kudryavstev (Russia), Anton Lyapunov (Ukraine), Andrey Nikitin (Russia), Serguei Okhai (Ukraine), Roman Polishchuk (Ukraine), Alexy Starodubtsev (Russia) and Igor Strizhanov (Russia) - as the team that performed in ZED and later Viva Elvis. And perhaps that is why the music and choreography accompanying this act has a somewhat Elvis-slant to it. In either case you can't go wrong with Banquine no matter what form it's presented in. It's a wonderful way to end the show! And an even better way to end the evening? Meeting up with our fellow Cirquesters for drinks and dessert after the show, at Auberge's Taverne Gaspar lounge!



### /// AND THE REST...

The last two days we had in Montréal paled in comparison. Sunday got off to a rather lack-luster start. Our day got off to a rather lack-luster start. We rose about 9:00am and met the Metzgers about 10:00am on the Mezanine, eating breakfast. Since we hadn't eaten we decide we were going to head out into the streets to find something, and they accompanied. Although we didn't have any place in mind, we gravitated toward Chez Suzette, the crepe place I like. It didn't open until 11:00am so we bumbled around the area, looking into a store or two, before the place opened. Once it did we settled down for a real breakfast! Nicole had what I had last night - the Sugarshack Special - whilst I had the three-cheese crepe. It was yuu-uum-mmy! Then we wandered down to the KURIOS Box Office to see if they were open - Nicole and I somewhat decided to see the show again last night; Doug and Mary decided they'd do the same, selecting the 1:30pm show. So once we made up our minds to see it again too, we had to visit the box office for available seats.



Anyway, on our way down we spotted a crate Cirque was opening in front of the Big Top and it was full of merchandise! I didn't see the crate the other night, or if I did it wasn't something I paid any attention to since it was raining, but today it caught my eye. So, naturally, we meandered over to it. Inside was a small selection of what you'd find in the Big Top's store - KURIOS stuff and some Cirque odds-n-ends. We played around with the hats and goggles from the show before making our way to the Box Office to procure our tickets. They had great seats left and so we chose 200-O-1/2 as our location, and then hung about until they opened the Big Top for our show.

Although the audience wasn't as excited as the one we had last night, they were still good enough to keep the energy high - we had a great second show! Following that show we returned to the streets of the Old Port, peeking into some stores until Doug & Mary parted from us. So we continued looking around, but not finding much of value, before we too went back to our room to relax for a bit. Eventually the four of us met back up for dinner at a place on Jacques Cartier Place - La Maree - where Nicole could get some fish and chips. I ended up with a steak and potatoes that were to die for. And a desert called "the chocolate nightmare", which was anything but, disappointingly.



Monday, our last day in Montréal, wasn't a bad one either. We'd gotten up about 9:00am, and tucked in quite a bit of breakfast over at Eggspectation, where they ask you to "grab the day by the eggs!" It's really good food too!

Heather, Jim, Chris and Todd were there earlier in the morning as a Goodbye Cirquesters breakfast, but, their meeting was a bit too early for Nicole and I who were, you know, on vacation. But it looked good so we decided to try it this morning instead of another round at Chez Suzette. And what a great choice it was! Both of our plates came with two eggs, potatoes, and our choice of bacon, ham or sausage, and toast. But while hers came with Pancakes, mine came with French toast and MmmMmm was it yummy! They, with my cappuccino, really hit the spot!

Filled with breakfast foods, we hit up the streets of the Old Port for our final stroll and to look-about. Nicole found a knick-knack or two at a store selling Indian-made goods, which was good. We totted about the cobblestone streets, walking down to the big top to check on the merchandise crate (it was closed), then walking down the facing street since a train cut us off from the big top earlier. We did end up back there before our time ran up because we really didn't have anywhere else to go! But eventually, by around 11:30am or so, we headed back to the hotel to wrap things up there and make our way to the airport.



By Noon we checked out and wheeled over to the taxi stand, which was exactly where it's always been - one block over, and one block up - from the hotel. According to the driver we picked the best time of day to head to the airport - mid-day. Traffic was no issue, which it probably would have been just a couple of hours later. And at the airport there was little delay too. We grabbed our boarding passes from an automated kiosk, walked right through security and customs, and then had a couple of hours on our hands to waste.



The plan to waste those was on the newly established Cirque du Soleil store at the airport, but, we couldn't find it. Later we learned that it was in the public concourse BEFORE you entered security. Go figure. What we didn't plan on was having our flight delayed.



Originally we were scheduled to take off at 3:30pm and arrive back in Atlanta about 6:00pm. Then my phone buzzed and I received a notice that our flight was delayed 20 minutes to 3:50pm take-off time. Then 4:30pm, then 5:30pm, then 6:30pm with an arrival in Atlanta at 2:15pm the following day... say WHAT?! We didn't leave until about 7:00pm, arriving in Atlanta about 10:00pm, and pulling through our door no later than 11:00pm.

But at least we got home...

\* \* \*

We, Nicole and I, had a fantastic time in Montréal, even if the weather was a bit of a downer. It was great flying into New York and road-tripping with Doug and Mary Metzger, staying overnight at their little getaway in Lake Placid. And it was equally gratifying to see all our Cirque-y friends again once we rolled in to Montréal: Heather Smith & Jim Strain, Chris Gullick & Todd Krause, Gena Colton, Quiche Lorraine (as she likes to be known by), Mark Wyrick (who I met here in Montréal in 2002), Vince Kramer, and of course, Rodolfo Elizondo. As for the show, well, what can we say? We really liked it a lot!

We certainly had our doubts before arriving, and even as we entered the Big Top, but the moment we saw the set and stage many of those doubts were set aside, and were definitely squashed when KURIOS' train pulled into station at the beginning of the show. Michel Laprise has certainly outdone himself; Guy Laliberté, and all of Cirque du Soleil even, should be proud. And being a home-grown director (the first who's risen in the organization to direct), I'm sure it means even more to him that this show is the success it is, from all accounts. We'll definitely be following KURIOS's path in the future, hoping to catch another ride on that train again soon!



*The End?*

