

Le Grand Tour

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL



RICHARD G RUSSO

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Le Grand Tour: Une Aventure du Cirque du Soleil
is a collection of real-life events. Names, places, and
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PRØLØGUE

Grand — 1: *having more importance than others.* 2a: *inclusive, comprehensive.* b: *definitive, incontrovertible.* 3: *chief; principal.* 4: *large and striking in size, scope, extent or conception.* 5: *lofty, sublime.* 6: *very good; wonderful.*

Tour — *a journey for business, pleasure, or education often involving a series of stops and ending at the starting point.*



What is *Le Grand Tour* you may ask? It's everything as defined above and much, much more. Beginning in April 2002 a series of events was set in motion that took me on a whirlwind tour of Cirque du Soleil shows, from their most recent (Varekai) to the eldest touring show (Saltimbanco). The goal: to see all eight Cirque du Soleil shows that was running at the time within the span of one year. The itinerary was tight; the cost considered overwhelming, but it was a journey I had to undertake — I *wanted* to undertake. I had just turned twenty-five and was anxious to experience the world. All that was left was for me to get around my inhibitions and step out there.

And I didn't go on this journey to prove I was the ultimate Cirque fan. No, the Grand Tour was my own so I could take my own fandom to a new, higher plateau. And higher it went, from the corners of my own continent: Montréal (Varekai), Las Vegas (Mystère & "O"), Denver (Alegría), Orlando (La Nouba & Journey of Man), Seattle (Dralion) and Tampa Bay (Quidam), to the corner of another: Europe (Saltimbanco).

Now, please enjoy the story of my Grand Tour of Cirque du Soleil shows as they were experienced. Each segment is populated by journal entries, reflections and other writings about the experience that occurred during the journey. Please enjoy them in the spirit for which they were written.



Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT I | MONTRÉAL

I stepped from my apartment at 4:30am the morning of April 24th to the watchful eye of a green-colored, mysteriously large moon. It hung eerily in the early morning sky like a sentinel in suspect, ready to cast doubt on the ambitious plans I had for the day's expedition, and the Grand Tour as a whole. I couldn't really say why, mind you; nevertheless I sensed a hint of malice on the full figure of *The Man's* ever observant eyes – the *Mare Imbrium* and *Mare Serenitatis* – and I wondered what craziness he had in store for me on this exciting adventure.



Almost at once after Cirque du Soleil announced the debut a new show for April 2002 my heart leapt at the chance to be part of the celebration for the first time. Deciding to embark on the journey was one I weighed heavily until the creation of the *Fascination Newsletter*, my Cirque du Soleil fan periodical. With its launch came a legitimate means and opportunity to shoulder the expense of traveling to Quebec: not only could I satisfy my

personal curiosity for this French-speaking enclave of our northern neighbor, but I could also travel in the capacity of the newsletter – to cover the show for our readers.

I spoke with Paul Roberts, a good friend and fellow writer on *Fascination*, and the two of us crafted a trip for two. But as the weeks leading up to April melted away, more and more people expressed interest in joining us. By the time I stumbled into the Orlando International Airport I knew whom to expect – we were a group of seven: some from the newsletter staff (Me, Paul Roberts and Keith Johnson, who came very much at the last minute) with the rest made up of various friends and family of each party. With me: Cedric Pansky, a long-time friend; with Paul Roberts, his friends: Ted and Dion; and with Keith, his fiancé: Lucy.

Any and all worries and trepidations about beginning this journey were long gone by then. Thus I smiled at my lunar companion, grabbed my belongings and took off for Montréal full-force, beginning my coup-de-grace of Cirque du Soleil fandom. Here is my story...

/// WINGS: ARRIVAL IN DORVAL

Wings.

To soar among clouds is to be among gods –

In a sea of blue and white.

Azure the skies aloft; under, the Strata,

An echelon bathed in delight.

So peaceful it is to fly upon a silver bird.

My friend and I have just returned from a walk around the Jacques Cartier pier – where the Grand Chapiteau stands triumphant, and a very interesting dinner experience at Galiano's Pasta & Bar – a rustic bistro down in the old quarter, or Vieux Port as it's called; at 410 St Vincent coin Ste Therese. The restaurant bills itself as an authentic Italian restaurant "with spunk," catering to the sophisticated palettes of the Montréalité by providing "authentic" old-style Italian dishes in a wood trimmed, stone-arched locale. While the brochure I picked up at the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) earlier in the day suggested they're well known for their pizzas and pastas, perhaps their claims to being "authentic" old-world style Italian were a bit exaggerated.



At least that's what this Italian-American found as he sampled the local Alfredo with Chicken. The noodles were great except Galiano omitted the parmigian that makes up the signature "alfredo" portion of the meal! Perhaps they had intended to place *Fettuccine al burro* on the menu, which does closely resemble what I received: fettuccine in a distinctive butter sauce. And do the Canadian's not believe in ice for their drinks? I digress.

Arrêt! (Stop!)

You know, I think I'm getting a little ahead of myself here. It's been such a long and exciting first day in Montréal that I'm a little beleaguered by exhaustion and thus I'm quite sure this isn't the best place to start the tale. So let me back up a second and get some perspective. Okay, there. While this adventure did begin upon a silver bird within a sea of azure and delight, getting to it was a bit of an adventure too. Or, placed in proper context, it amazes me what transpires to rend my itinerary. You know, one time I had to sit on the runway in Albuquerque to burn off jet-fuel because a staffer overfilled the plane causing an overweight situation. Another time I sat on the tarmac in Atlanta because the pilots couldn't get the plane's left engine started. On this flight, the crew circled the runway in Orlando for about 20 minutes a reason I was unable to discern, which delayed my arrival and pushed my once fifty-one minute layover to a twenty minute dash from one side of the Atlanta airport to the exact opposite side.

Thankfully I was able to catch my connecting flight, which turned out to be much more interesting. I sat next to an older woman who was returning home after a six month winter stay in Florida. We hopped on the subject about language (I don't speak any French) and she told me that while she had been living in the Montréal area all her life, she didn't know much either. To say I was surprised was an understatement and I wondered how she got around without knowing any of the native tongue. While she always loved the French people and the city, she said to my inquiry, she never felt compelled to learn its language. That put me a little more at ease; I've fretted about getting around the city without a language reference don't you know.

After the 2 1/2 hour flight, and the wonderful aerial views of Montréal and of the big top sitting exultantly on the quays of the old port, the plane touched down at Dorval and I was ready for my close-up with customs. A wee bit nervous, mind you, as it was my first time after all. What would it be like? What would they ask me? Would they search me? Would my passport be okay? Did I fill out the declaration card correctly? What if? Would they? Bah! Too many questions to consider... I nervously stepped up to the customs lines and waited. When I was called forth, I passed the agent my passport, declaration card and smiled, patiently awaiting anything he may ask.

"What is your purpose in Canada?" The customs agent asked right away.

"Pleasure," I replied, "I'm here to see Cirque du Soleil's new show."

"Oh... Varekai!" the man exclaimed, now smiling himself. "They're great, aren't they? I saw their last show here."

"Yes sir," I nodded. He stamped my passport, and handed it back.

And I was on my way; the worry was all for naught, nor did I have long to wait for my good friend Cedric – a resident of Denver, Colorado – to arrive. Cedric Pansky is actually responsible for my introduction to Cirque in the first place; although I find it somewhat ironic that while he was always the one trying to showcase Cirque to all his friends (including myself), I am not a bigger fan than he is. The two of us met online in a Disney / Lion King related Internet Chat room and from there our friendship grew... and grew... and grew! When he heard I was heading to Montréal to see the new show I invited him along. He gave up backstage tickets to the Lion King musical just to meet me here!



Once we met up, the two of us took the opportunity to exchange our American paper into Canadian funds. The unit of currency is the Canadian dollar (usually denoted CDN\$). Coins are in denominations of 1, 5, 10 and 25 cents, and \$1 (a large gold-colored coin – referred to as “Loonies” due to the picture of the Loon on the coin) and a \$2 (a large bi-metallic coin – referred to as “Twonies” just because the one-dollar coins are called “Loonies”).

The bills are in increments of \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100. What set the Canadian currency apart from our American counterparts are its brash colors. For instance: the \$5.00 bill is blue, the \$10.00 bill is purple and the \$20.00 bill is green. If you’re lucky to see a \$50 or \$100, they’re red and brown respectively. It’s such a colorful and interesting currency, much richer and whimsical than what I’m used to. I love it!

With our pockets full of Canadian money, we set off for the Crowne Plaza Montréal Centre – our hotel in the heart of Downtown Montréal. We had no other means of transportation other than a taxicab, so Cedric and I went out in the frigid cold (okay, so it wasn’t *that* cold) and prepared to talk to someone who wouldn’t be able to understand us. We stumbled upon a rate board that displayed the prices from the airport to various locations within the city and environs. Since we wanted to go downtown, we immediately took notice of the post: 60\$ Limo; 28\$ Taxi. At first we decided to walk down to the taxi bays, which were farther down the sidewalk, but a word from Cedric stopped me right in my tracks.

“Hey, let’s just take a limo.”
“Are you crazy?”





No, he wasn't and he had the driver load up his suitcase before I could further object. So I followed behind him and got myself loaded. Before I knew it, we were on the roads of Quebec – in style! Now, I know what you're thinking... and to squash any thought to the contrary, what we rode in was not a "stretch" limousine. Airport limos are just a step up in taxi service. And as you can see from the price, they're well paid! The ride was well worth the cost in the end: the seats were plush and comfortable, and the ride smooth and without incident. Cedric and I arrived at the hotel about an hour after touchdown, but it was painfully obvious we arrived earlier than our 3:00pm check-in time.

Instead of sitting around, we checked our bags into concierge and hit the town; there was nothing to lose! I had some maps on my person so we decided it best we try and find the Tourist Info Center I had marked out as our first stop to help us orientate to our new surroundings. Luckily, our hotel was right nearby the Sherbrooke Métro station (the Montréal Subway) and thus we plunged below to take our first ride. It was intimidating at first – being an outsider – and it didn't help any that we didn't speak the language or had any clue to where we were going!

After purchasing nine transit tickets for 12\$ CDN, he and I took our first steps into a grid of trains that we would later master. We did find out very quickly that the Métro consisted of 4 lines,



Montréal Métro	
Orange	Henri-Bourassa to Côte-Vertu
Green	Honoré-Beaugrand to Angrignon
Blue	Saint-Michel to Snowdon
Yellow	Berri-UQAM to Longueuil

each a different color: Orange, Green, Blue and Yellow. The Métro station we entered (and the one nearest our hotel) lied on the Orange Line. Our destination was the Peel station, which lied on the Green line. The two of us traced our route on a map dominantly displayed on the station walls looking like two lost puppies, but we found our route: Take the Orange Line in the direction of Côte-Vertu, get off at Berri-UQAM (pronounced Beh-rie-ookam,) meander to the Green Line platform, and take it in the direction of Angrignon. It'll be the fourth stop. Simple! Before long we would become masters of the Métro, but for this first trip, things were still a little rocky. To make a long story short, we found the Tourist Info Center, looked around, grabbed a few brochures and returned back on the Métro to our hotel.

Unfortunately our little jaunt to the Tourist Information Centre didn't waste quite enough time; therefore, to squander even more we decided to grab a bite to eat at the buffet located on the hotel's second floor. Since Cedric was very thirsty and looking for a nice glass of iced tea, there was nothing to lose.

Or was there?

To anyone who knows him, Cedric is all about iced tea and for him to get a glass at this stage in the game was well worth his wait. He doesn't like just any old iced tea, mind you; being a connoisseur, he has a more refined taste and thus prefers freshly brewed tea over anything else. It is unfortunate then that he did not pay attention to the preparation of our drink orders as they were being handled. When I saw how our hostess brought out the Coca-Cola I ordered (glass, no ice, Coke in a can), I feared for poor Cedric. Knowing how he loves freshly brewed iced tea (and none of that canned stuff); I knew if she did to him what she did to me (which was open the can, and pour the drink in front of us), Cedric would go ballistic. He wouldn't stand for it. Come hell or high water he'd cause a scene, a bona fide national incident.

Sure enough our server brought over his glass and set down a can of iced tea. She promptly opened it before him, poured it into the glass, and then left the can for his pleasure. Watching his face was pure pleasure, not that I hate to see Cedric in pain, but it was such a priceless moment I don't think I'll ever forget. With the hiss of escaping compressed air and the click of the can's aluminum tab, his facial expression went from all smiles (in anticipation of his drink) to one that resembled a face you'd find on someone who just received the news his best friend had been lost. His face simply fell. If a grown man would ever be tempted to cry (and ever I expected to see one), then would have been that moment. But, as shocking as the pouring of the tea was, Cedric took it all in stride. He took up the glass, looked in it for a second, and tentatively took a sip. With a laugh from me out of the way, the meal went on as if nothing else was wrong. But I knew Cedric was not a very happy camper.

Before long it was time to check into our room and we finally got settled in. I called my parents to let them know we were in; called Keith Johnson in Seattle then Paul Roberts in Cincinnati to let them know what room we were in; then called Rikke Wivel at Cirque du Soleil to let her know I arrived and that I looked forward to meeting her in a couple of days. Once my phone usage was over, Cedric called his mom in Denver and they spoke for a little while.

Afterwards, we decided that dinner was probably in order; we settled on this place we picked up a brochure for in the Tourist Info Center – Galiano's Pasta & Bar – the Italian restaurant down in the old quarter I was telling you about earlier. And, after our semi-Italian meal we decided to walk along the waterway in order to catch our first glimpse of the blue and yellow swirls of the Cirque Chapiteau. It sat there majestically under the almost full moon sky. *Ahh... Varekai*. Tomorrow it will be ours.



Now it's about 8:00pm and we're taking in a little French-Canadian TV. Soon we'll call it a night, but what a glorious first day it has been for me, my first experience in a semi-foreign country! On our way home on the Métro I spied something that made me think twice about where I was: a sticker that was firmly affixed to the doorway of our train – "Vive Le Quebec!" it said, and it was then I finally realized that I thrust into a different culture and a different language, and I relish it.

/// VAAAAAREEEEEEEKAI!

“You know, there’s a searchlight on top of one of the towers that is nearby our hotel. We can use that as a guide back.”

“Great! We’ll head for that!”

It’s one o’clock in the morning and we’ve just gotten in – Cedric, Paul and I – to our hotel room (#1506) at the Crowne Plaza Montréal Centre just off the Sherebrook station on the Green Line of the Metro system from an amazing time at the Grand Chapiteau, staked on Jacques Cartier Pier, down in the Vieux Port of Montréal. I want nothing more than to close my eyes and drift off into a blissful sleep, but I can’t; none of us can. The adrenaline continues to pump through our veins, the music still pulses in our ears, our feet still stomping to the acrobatics and our hands applauding their ovation. Varekai, if you couldn’t have guessed, was simply fantastic; I can hardly collect my thoughts...

We would have gotten home quite a bit sooner – actually, our plan was to take the métro back to our room (it’s only a couple of stops), but our on-site antics lasted a bit longer than intended. The metro closed at midnight stranding us there. Thankfully, Lucy and Keith came to the rescue with a rental, so the five of us – with Cedric on the right, me on the left and Paul in the middle (all three of us crammed in the back seat) – hopped in and we were on our way, through a wonderful, bizarre, and very much unplanned trip through the streets of Montréal – driving through China Town, the Club Scene, turning right on reds (against Montréal traffic laws) and basically getting lost in the maze of roadways that are very much unfamiliar.



Do you know before it was over we were on our way up Mount Royal?

But enough about that; what about the show? As I said, it was simply fabulous. Cirque couldn’t have picked a better spot to display their newest creation either; the pier is located down in the Old Port of Montréal. And we found ourselves in a flurry of activity upon entering the grounds, especially the souvenir tents. Many of the folks were enjoying the room’s heat, compliments of Cirque – it was quite chilly out – but for us (the fans), we were ready to drop our cold-hard cash for some new Cirque goodies! I was one of the first to enter the souvenir tent and quite regret doing so: I was stopped by a girl hawking the Varekai Creator’s Notebook, a “work-in-progress” pseudo-programme book featuring photos of training sessions, costume illustrations and the like. Unfortunately I didn’t understand a word of her animated sales pitch, it was in French! All I could do was smile, nod, laugh and agree with whatever she said. But I suppose it didn’t matter, we spoke the universal language of Cirque and that was all that was needed to complete the transaction.

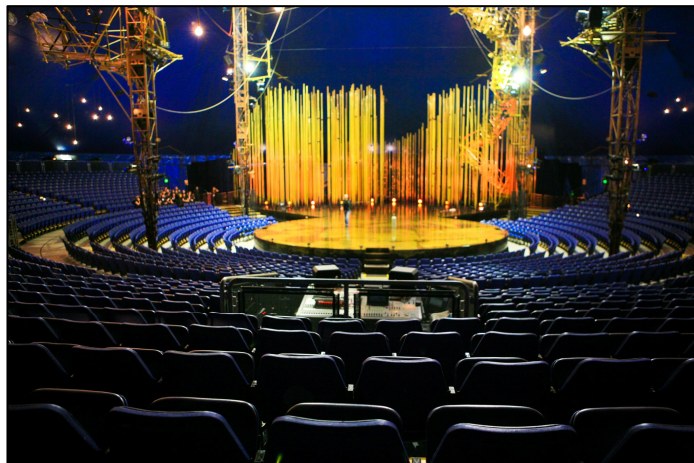
Entering the big top was a treat in itself; its flimsy doors parted and my nostrils instantly filled with a strange, cinnamon-like, scent. It was sweet, intoxicating and welcoming. There were sights and sounds all around, the crowd was a-buzz with excitement; us too! The world of Varekai is a mysterious, lush realm that they say exists deep within a forest – any forest – at the summit of a volcano. In this world an array of fantastical creatures subsist amongst an extraordinary place where anything is possible.



Varekai (pronounced var-ee-kie) is a Romanic term meaning “wherever” or “it does not matter the place” and lives as a “tribute to the nomadic soul, to the spirit and art of the circus tradition, and to those who quest with infinite passion.” The term is homage not only to the acrobats that push their art to the extreme, but also a reminder to the wanderers of ancient Europe: the Gypsy – the universal wanderers. “The sky lets go a solitary young man,” the press release from Cirque du Soleil eludes, “and the story of Varekai begins.” The solitary young man is Icarus, the fabled son of the brilliant Greek artisan Daedalus. His is a story of how excitement can cloud one’s better judgment. As Greek legend tells, Daedalus crafted two magnificent pairs of wings out of feathers and wax for himself and his brash young son (Icarus). Taking to the skies in a flurry of excitement, Icarus does not heed his

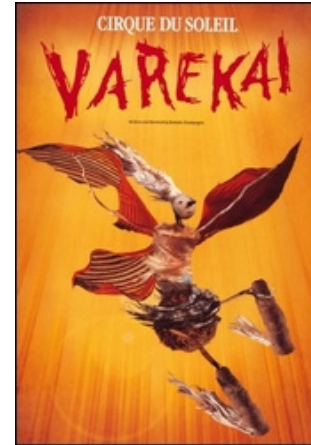
father’s warnings and strays too close to the sun, melting his wings. But, unlike the Icarus of fabled tale (in which Icarus plummets to his death) the Icarus of Cirque du Soleil falls into a fantastical world of good and evil where he must redeem himself.

This fantastical world of Varekai plays out on one of the most unique stage structures I have ever seen for a Cirque du Soleil Performance, and we can thank Stéphanie Roy for creating such an engaging scene. In the background, 20-foot poles jet into the sky, simulating the forest the main character (Icarus) falls into. The poles themselves appear bamboo-like but are metallic in nature, and can sway to the winds of change or of the weight of the occasional performer who climbs them. And climb them they do – using strips of a sticky substance that runs the entire length of them.



The poles are but one part of the a structure that will instantly capture your attention upon entering the big top, no matter which door you come through. The stage is cross-sectioned with a catwalk hanging high above the forest floor, accessible only by a single staircase, winding around the forest trees. The stage itself consists of many movable parts, two round areas that are used for the Russian Swing, a risible platform, and three small holes to allow characters to dive below ground. (Believe me the space under that stage is not all that big!)

“On this day at the edge of time, in this place of pure and undiluted possibility, begins an inspired incantation of life rediscovered and to a newly found wonder in the mysteries of the world and the mind.” There are eleven (11) different performances (acts) by the troupe of Varekai. Each an extension of the world brought to us by Dominique Champagne and the other creators. Varekai is certainly an uplifting, colorful extravaganza that shatters the meaning of the word spectacle. Let me now share with you those amazing performances that brought us to our feet, mouths agape, hands applauding loudly, and our minds exploding with emotions never before felt.



Flight of Icarus

The story of Cirque’s Icarus is a rich one, filled with the essence of freedom. Icarus, played by Anton Chelnokov (Tchelnokov) from Russia – who is the same young (now all grown up) who was previously in Saltimbanco as a third of the Adagio Trio (the child in white). His drama takes flight as he descends into a populated forest full of curious creatures “costumed as mutant birds, insects or exotic hybrid species.” Icarus is ensnared by a net, stripped of the wings that gave him flight, and is hoisted high above the forest floor. His struggle for freedom within the flexible cage touches on emotions harbored in us all. The right to freedom is an insuppressible human quality and is one that Anton Chelnokov plays upon well as he triumphs over his imprisonment. In escaping his harsh imprisonment, Icarus flies once again across the heavens in celebration. But, as he touches the ground he finds himself face to face with a beautiful young creature (Olga Pikhienko), who is as inquisitive about him as he is about her. Unable to communicate, they begin to mime each other, and then... fall in love.

Icarian Games

The discipline is a variety in the genre commonly referred to as antipode. Antipodes (the plural form) are persons dwelling at opposite points on the globe. But, in the case of the Icarian Games, the antipodist is the porter, or the artist lying upon his back in a specially created incline chair. His job is to be a prop used only for tossing and juggling the voltigeur (flyer) with his feet – unbelievable! The three brothers that make up the team known as the Rampin Bros. – Javier Santos Leal (“Javi”), Pedro Santos Leal, and Ramon Santos Leal (“Moncho”), from Spain) come from a seven-generation family known as the Santos-Rampin, which explains how easy they make this art look. Their energetic performance brings down the house and their exciting choreography will raise the heartbeat.

Spinning Meteor

In every Cirque du Soleil show there is a nod, a hint if you will, to the Chinese Circus. In Varekai, the Spinning Meteor (here, referred to as the “Water Meteors”) makes a triumphant comeback after first being featured in the 1986 show “Le Magie Continue”. Unlike “Magie’s” performance, the Spinning Meteor’s here are performed by 3 cute Chinese boys (Bin He, Junping Yang, and Siguang Li). Janice Kennedy in the Ottawa Citizen put it best: “Three young boys toss spinning meteors into the skies, twirling about with elegant energy as they catch them, over and over”!

Aerial Straps

The second of three aerial acts is a spectacle called the Aerial Straps. Performed by Kevin and Andrew Atherton (from the United Kingdom), they fly on the scene as one. But just as soon as they catch your eye, they become two angels flying amongst the stars. Their performance blends the skills needed for a Tissu, with the demanding arts of the Banquine. You’ll be amazed as this brotherly duo soars from one end of the big top to the other, then returning virtually to the same spot from which they left. Or, launching away from one another and meeting in mid air! The Aerial Straps is a powerful and yet very elegant performance. The two brothers also make a re-appearance later in the show as guardian angels for the – as yet – unredeemed Icarus.

Georgian Dance

One of the most energetic dances on earth is the Georgian dance. Known for their quick twists, spins and leaps, the dance is performed by three male dancers: Temur Koridze, Badri Esatia, and Khvicha Tetvadze (all from Georgia). One of the highlights of the performance is during the clashing swords element. The house lights dim as the stage became aflame, highlighted by the sparks of the crashing swords. A shocking and wonderful way to end the first half of the show.

Intermission

Varekai’s first half ends on a positive and upbeat note. The energy from the Georgian dance continues right on through the next 20 minutes. People get up, visit with one another and while they are away, the stage is set up for the second half of the show. The lights then lower with the sound of dripping water still ringing in our ears, which has been playing throughout the entire intermission, and the show begins. Once again the big top fills with the buzzing of bees – filling with an array of them, arranged in an optical display that is simple, elegant and beautiful. Words fail when it comes to their display of light and music – it’s almost as if Cirque is lulling you to contentment. It really is a neat effect! But while the display of light and music continue overhead, the stage is being set below for the opening act – Body Skating.

Body Skating

The second act is opened by a colorful and lighthearted act known as Body Skating. An array of acrobats virtually “skates” across this smooth blue surface performing an energetic and playful show of strength, timing and fun! Their costumes mirror their jolly nature in colors of red, green, yellow, blue, and purple in curious splashes of all! These acrobats will have you smiling in no time!

Solo on Crutches

The show takes a darker turn with the Solo on Crutches performance by Vladimir Ignatenkov (Russia). Flanked by ominous creatures from deep within the forest and helped by the guardians of Varekai, he shows Icarus that he can stand on two legs despite all that has kept him down. This act is simple and yet difficult at the same time; Ignatenkov twirls about the stage, feet far from the ground!

Acrobatic Pas de Deux

The Solo on Crutches performance gives way to the duo of Oleg Ouchakov (Russia) and Tatiana Gousarova (Ukraine), who perform an acrobatic slow dance with lifts, twists and mid-air spins. Their quick movements and fast drops fluttered hearts and kept us on the edge of our seat! Both artists were previously seen in Quidam's Banquine act.

Triple Trapeze

The Triple Trapeze is a wide, static (non-moving) trapeze performance suspended from the ceiling by four equal-length ropes. Four spidery-dressed females (alternating performances by: Stellah Umeh, Zoe Voctproa Tedstill, Raquel Karro and Susanna Defraia Scalas, Helen Ball, and Cinthia Beranek), spin, gyrate and roll with their amazing grace and attention to detail. It's called Triple Trapeze because the ropes create three bars which the girls may use to accent their performance.

Hand-balancing on Canes

Olga Pikhienko, another Quidam alum, performs this beautiful hand-balancing act dressed in an angelic white sequined costume. Her body sparkles as she contorts herself upon one, two, and even three canes as they're moved about on stage. Her performance mirrors that which was seen in Quidam during her tenure, only here it is more sensual than sexual.

Russing Swing

The Russian Swings are without a doubt the absolute show-stopping act within the entire show. The Swings have previously been featured in Saltimbanco (making its Cirque du Soleil debut) and in the Las Vegas extravaganza "O"; and each time the discipline has made an appearance, its spectacle is compounded. For Varekai, acrobats are hurled high into the air where they are then caught by (and landing upon) the wrists of their partners, who themselves are situated on a multi-staged platform. The set is also flanked by two canvas sheets that stretch from floor to ceiling; "Ooooo's" and "Aaaaahs" punctuate the air when an acrobat flings across and lands in one! If there was ever an act in Cirque du Soleil that I feared for the acrobat's life, this would be it. And rightfully so, the crowd gave the troupe its own standing ovation during the performance!

Interestingly, while the crew sets up most of the apparatus, for the Russian Swings the acrobats anchor the swings to their rotating floor manually as the act is introduced. Tonight the cast had a hard time getting the swings setup too, Paul and I noticed immediately, which resulted in an improvised bridge between the two songs used for this part of the show.

Varekai ended on such a high that the spectators did not (or could not) sit back down in their seats. The standing ovation continued right through the dancing finale, which (by the way) is not yet set in stone). The show is very much a work in progress after all and will continue to be that way until Toronto. Even so, that knowledge doesn't take away the fact that the set was awesome, the costumes colorful and the acrobatics out of this world!

Okay, it's time for me to put down my pad and pen, pull the covers up and snuggle in for a good night's rest. I'm sure my room-mates here will enjoy the darkness. I'll finish my thoughts about the show tomorrow and on our behind-the-scenes tour too – oh, did I neglect to mention that earlier? In the morning, okay? Goodnight!

/// MEETING THE WANDERERS BACKSTAGE

Yaaaaaaaaaawn!

I wish I had something more up-beat and energetic to say to start the day but, after last night's late turn-in and this morning's early rise, I'm afraid I'm tapped out. And by the grumbles coming from my companions, it's safe to say they feel the same about the morning as I do.

The Gang (consisting Cedric, Paul, Ted and Dion) and I are languishing here at the breakfast table, located in the lobby of our hotel, waiting for our simple meal to arrive. The menu here consists of your typical fare – bacon and eggs and toast – with little or no French-Canadian flair, but when you're tired, hungry and need something to jump-start the day, there's not much one can do. At least I had a hot shower this morning – what, you never have problems with a “foreign” shower? Yesterday morning I fell perplexed.

I turned the knobs that would gain me the hot water and cold water, mixing just enough of each to make the temperature just right. When I reached down to turn the showerhead on, however, I found myself at a sense of loss. There was no pull lever, no knobs or any kind of switch to activate the bugger. “What the hell?” I cursed, now having to couch down to examine the faucet. It was the last thing I wanted to do, yet, even down at eye level the solution remained elusive. I imagine I sat there for 2 to 3 minutes just trying to figure the thing out. With water wasting away, I shrugged and decided there was only one solution: I cupped my hands under the running water and threw a handful over my back. Again and again I did so until my body was sufficiently wet; then I grabbed the soap.

I know all of this sounds rather funny, and in retrospect it is, but at the time I wasn't laughing. After a few more minutes crouching in the tub, I turned off the water, dried and dressed myself. And upon completing that task, I barged out of the room and exclaimed, “How the hell do you run that thing?” Cedric was already laughing because he could hear the distress and continuous running water through the thin walls. Laugh or not, he was next and wouldn't you know he figured it out without a problem – that bastard! (And I say that playfully.)

Otherwise, we're all nursing cups of coffee – me included, which is a rarity since I do not drink the bean – and while we wait, let me continue with the story from last night.

Before we had even set foot into the Big Top that evening, a behind the scenes tour immediately following the show was already waiting for us. All we had to do was hang about the big top after the final curtain call, wait for the patrons to leave and be met by Head of Automation – Pascal Sioui – who would lead us on our journey backstage. We actually met him just prior to the start of the show; he came over and met with Paul (the two are good friends) and



we went over again what to do to meet up with him later. It was my first handshake with the man; he looked exactly like his picture from the web!

Pascal was very nice and easy going, but busy as all get out. Head of Automation has a big responsibility to keep things going. All the movements on stage – the turning Russian Swing tables, the stage-hole covers, even the rising island was all under his command. It was his job to make sure they were not only operated safely, but performed on queue when requested. And if the machinery didn't work automatically (as programmed), he had to find a quick-fix on the fly to keep the show going.

Stepping behind the curtain and into the furious world of the behind-the-scenes of Cirque du Soleil is always an interesting treat. While each touring show is set up similarly, because each has its own unique set of acts and needs, each offers its own compelling view of just what goes on after that final curtain call. It's not all the same, and our group got to experience it first hand with Varekai after the night's performance.

It took quite some time for all the patrons to file out of big top tonight; in fact, by the time the last of the VIPs were exiting, the stage crew had already dismantled the Russian Swing apparatus and was folding up the dismount matting for the night. And while one set handled the swings, another worked furiously to anchor the Triple Trapeze, remove the canvas sheets the Russian Swings flyers flew into, and stow any remaining equipment that might have been left around by the artists. This was an unusual point of view from a patron's perspective – generally this happens out of the watchful eye of the spectator, and for good reason! But it was all very fascinating to watch just how quickly these folks worked. It truly is a testament to their training and dedication that these folks can do what they do night after night (and sometimes twice a night) for the sake of the show.

The staff even had most of the celebratory “confetti” that rained from the skies during the show's finale swept up. It was nothing more than red, moon shaped thin-art tissue paper, but that didn't stop Paul and me from grabbing a handful to keep as souvenirs anyway.

We fans just love that kind of stuff. Once the activity on stage ceased and as soon as Pascal finished his end-of-show check-list, he gathered around the group and began to take us on a behind-the-scenes back-stage tour of Varekai!

Pascal immediately led us around the points of the stage, settling near the bamboo pole forest. And as he went on about some thing or another, my mind wandered off and I reached out and placed the palm of my hand upon the stage: a simple gesture of reflection about all that I had seen (the show) and what I had yet to see (the behind-the-curtain aspects). It seemed appropriate to connect to the stage and the experience in this manner. This tactile response made for an even lasting memory and I'll never forget how cold the stage was even just after the show.

The "Bamboo" poles were also a treat see up close. After I had planted my hand on the stage, I immediately put it on one of the poles that made up the "forest" of Varekai. I was surprised to find these poles were purely metal, and not of a plastic substance I thought they might be made from. Giving them a thump also proved they were hollow and not solid as I also had thought. The backs of the poles were affixed with a red colored sticky tape-like substance, which ran up the entire length of many of the poles. This sticky-tape, I surmised, was used for ease in climbing similar to what the Chinese Poles artists in Saltimbanco and Mystère must use.

It was quite some time before we actually made it back stage too because by the time we got close to the poles, we actually went around the set into what I would call the "staging" area. This is an area that exists between what the audience sees and the real back stage room where the artists congregate before coming on scene. The view from this angle was quite extraordinary. Looking out through the forest into the spectator seats was something I had not expected to see. And it seemed to put the experience into perspective and heightened my thirst for more behind-the-scenes follies. Getting to see what the artist sees? Oh yeah!

It was there we met up with Paul Bannerman, the drummer for this exciting new show.

Mr. Bannerman turned out to be a very nice man, young and quite passionate about his job and his role in the show. He was so enthusiastic in fact he was delighted to take all nine of us on a min-tour of his musical world, with many of us actually climbing up into his drummer's box (no more than two at a time, thanks to a warning by the backstage crew.) While up there, he explained how he communicated with the rest of the musicians and they with him; how he watched the show from monitors rather than live; and how the music of Varekai fit with the acts themselves. Both Paul Roberts and Keith Johnson were in their element here – with Keith being an Audiophile and a Behind-the-Scenes kind-of guy, and Paul Roberts being a musician himself.

While I enjoyed getting a glimpse into the drummer's world, most of what Keith and Paul Roberts had engaged Paul Bannerman with was over my head. So I didn't find it as fascinating as say... looking out through the forest from the musician's area. Nor did I find it as compelling as actually walking out onto the stage through those poles – just as

the singers, the musicians, and many of the characters/acrobats did during the performance. I dared not go right onto the stage, however, but I was tempted.

Did you know that not only was I actually able to touch the stage, put my hand the poles that made up the forest, and see the where the music was played, but I also saw and touched the big balloon John Gilkey totes around during the show and the fancy light poles used to create the “firefly” effect that opens the second act? It was all very, very cool!

The second half of our tour began when we left the “staging” area for the backstage area. That is, once they pulled us away from Bannerman! You can actually see this backstage area from outside the big top – it appears to be another small tent right beside the Grand Chapiteau – but small it is not. In this extension, the performers have access to everything they need: costuming, make-up, a spa, showers, lockers, a tumblers mat, and even a video system set up so they can view their performance in that night’s show. It was an amazing site to see, and we were able to explore each of these areas in further detail.

Take the costume/make-up area for example. I was surprised at how cramped the quarters there really were. On one side of this sectioned off booth were the costumed, hanging there in all their glory. And on the other were two or three tables with mirrors – places for the cast to put on their make-up. Being there amongst the costumes was a real treat and I had to cop a feel on one or two before we left the area. We also got to see where the performers apply their makeup – looking right into the same mirrors! I was dumbfounded at how cramped, flimsy and cheap the set up was. Cheap or not, though, it did serve its purpose. I imagined the young boy who played Icarus taking off his make-up after the show, while I looked into that mirror. It was strange to see my face staring back. And, I also saw a few of the performers milling about – running into John Gilkey (quickly), one of the Water Meteor boys, Alberto the clown, and “Mad Max” himself!

But there is one person we did run into that pretty much made up for that: Olga Pikhienko, former hand-balancer for Quidam, now a character and balancing artist for Varekai. As soon as she walked by, Pascal called her over, and I could see Paul’s expression immediately – he was simply flabbergasted!

We left Olga, Pascal, and the rest of the Varekai backstage crew around 11:45pm that evening chanting “I met Olga, I met Olga!” in homage to Paul and his daughter’s experience with Erik Karol from Dralion. Not unlike her experience, where she received a kiss on the forehead from Erik just as she left the big top (dumbfoundedly saying over and over “I met Erik! I met Erik!”), Paul and I too had the same feeling. While we didn’t receive a kiss (or any other kind of contact from Olga), just being in the presence of such a fine specimen of femininity was too much. It overwhelmed us both.

Then, of course, we piled into the car and made our way back to the hotel to sleep, where I began to tell you about the show last night. Right now, as I said, we’re getting breakfast in preparation for our journey to Cirque’s Headquarters this morning, which I’ll update you on next time...

/// THE HIDDEN WORLD AT CIRQUE HQ

“Hello?” I said wearily, picking up the phone.

“Hello, is this Ricky?” the voice asked at the other end of the line.

“Yes,” I replied, a little confounded.

“Hi! This is Rikke Wivel from Cirque du Soleil...”

6:45am.

That’s what the time read as I turned over and my eyes fell upon the clock; only fifteen minutes to go before our curtain call. Why did we have to get up so early on vacation? Because we had a special treat in store that we definitely did not want to be late for – a tour of the Cirque Headquarters, our next great Cirque Adventure! To complement our Behind-the-Scenes tour of Varekai, I arranged for us to have a tour of the HQ before we even stepped foot in Canada. That arrangement was made possible by a growing friendship with Cirque du Soleil’s Internet Guru. How we met is somewhat a cliché nowadays, (considering we met online), but we hit it off pretty quickly. We had the perfect working relationship – if I had a question, I’d ask her; and if she could, she’d answer! So when she asked me one morning whether or not I’d enjoy a tour of the HQ building while I was in Montréal, I was stunned. Why? In general Cirque du Soleil does not give tours of their facilities to the general public.

Getting to the Cirque Headquarters wouldn’t be a difficult process, but it wasn’t easy for a group of people without self-transportation. My contact there provided detailed instructions on how to get there when she called yesterday afternoon. Her call was quite unexpected too. I was about to say some kind of sarcastic remark or funny guffaw regarding the shower (as Paul Roberts and his group had just arrived, and Paul wanted to get a shower), when the phone rang. I nearly jumped out of my seat because I wasn’t expecting any phone calls – who even knew I was there besides my parents? Certainly they wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency.

“Hi! This is Rikke Wivel from Cirque du Soleil....” and I don’t remember the rest of what she said.

“Oh my god!” I exclaimed. “I can’t believe it—how did you find me?”

“I’m not stupid you know,” she said back playfully.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean that. It’s just that I didn’t give you the room number-”

A super sleuth Rikke Wivel turned out to be. She called the hotel front desk and asked for me by name, apparently, and they not only provided the information to her but rang my room for her as well. It was a surprise to say the least and a moment that will always be a memorable one about the trip. She and I talked for a few minutes about Cirque, our upcoming tour, and offering her brief insights about Varekai before ending our conversation with an undeniable sense of curiosity at how we’d perceive the show. She needn’t have worried.

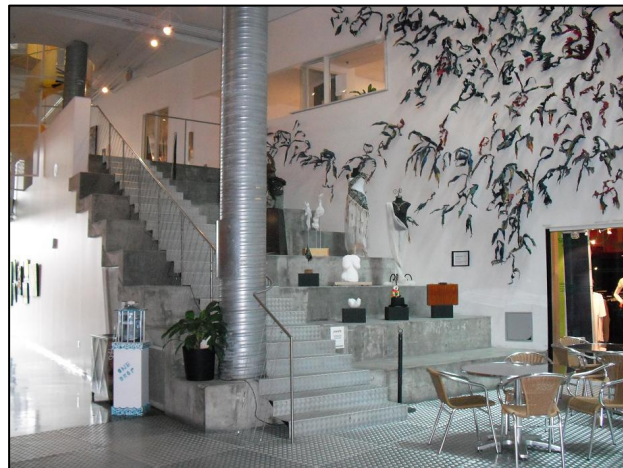
Rikke instructed us to take the Métro – the Orange Line – in the direction of Henri-Bourassa. “You’ll be on it for some time,” she said. “Look for Jarry station. And get off there.” Once we’d reach Jarry, she continued to explain that “you’ll get on a bus, one–nine–three, and take it Easterly to Second Avenue.” The bus trip would also take some time, as she said the HQ was quite far from Jarry station. No bother, the five of us retreated below ground at Sherebrooke station and caught the train.



After quite a long trip amongst the citizens of Montréal, we arrived at Second Avenue. At first glance the neighborhood did not look all that inviting. In fact, it was pretty run down! It was a good thing we were a party of five or I don’t think I would have felt safe there. Besides, there weren’t any signs or banners that said we were at Cirque du Soleil – in fact, there was nothing of the sort! Our eyes spotted a huge warehouse building in the distance and began to walk toward it. It wasn’t until we got closer that we figured out we were in the right location – there was

an old Cirque du Soleil touring truck parked in the field right next to it. The building itself (which was quite enormous) was not marked either. Only the numbers 8400 adorned it in black.

If there’s one thing about Cirque, they know how to choose a location. The Headquarters building is situated on an old landfill site, which has since been covered over. They chose the site for many reasons – first of which was to revitalize the dilapidated area around them. In fact, that is part of their charter – to remain close to the people on the street. The lobby was rather barren, except for a metallic sculpture right ahead of us and above that – five Cirque du Soleil clocks – each for its shows: Saltimbanco, Mystère, Alegria, Quidam and Dralion. The clocks had a picture of a scene from their denoted show as its face, and were set to the time wherever the show was set up. Before long a young blond woman came walking around the corner of an unmarked corridor and asked immediately for me. I rose from the bench I was sitting on and introduced myself. She immediately hugged me and said her name (which I’m keeping confidential).



We embraced for a moment longer before we began nervous chitchat about our journey down to the HQ, the show the previous night even what we would see on this tour. I introduced Paul Roberts, whom she knew well; Cedric Pansky, my friend; Ted and Dion, who introduced themselves; and Keith and LouAnna. Now the tour could officially begin!

The tour lasted for a little over three hours. We were led around various places within the building. Our first stop was the trophy cabinet, where various awards, Emmy's and other trinkets were kept that Cirque du Soleil had been awarded with throughout the years. It was interesting to see these awards up close. Not many fans can say they've actually done that!



Our next stop after that was into the Costume Shop, where they hand make all the costumes seen in every one of their shows – an entire room is devoted to this process; the Shoe Shop, where they make all the shoes for the performers; the Hat Room, where all the hats are made and kept; the Mask Room, where the masks for the different shows are re-created and stored; even the two practice studios, where one of the Spinning Meteor boys were actually practicing and in the other, the Russian Swing number was set up for practice and warm-up.



After our big tour around the various facilities housed within the Headquarters building, the entire group was treated to something extra special. We were led into a small boardroom where we met two other folks from the Cirque Club website. It turned out these young women were actually the folks who replied to the emails, wrote the articles and kept track of the Discussion Board there. Keith had a field day talking to them about various things, while I pretty much stayed quiet. I think he was making enough conversation for the both of us (if not the entire group!). Meanwhile, my contact was wrestling with the computer network connection within the room. It seemed whatever she wanted to show us was somehow tied into the network. As Keith continued talking, the rest of us were quiet; the anticipation in the room was quite thick. I began to wonder what she had in store for us, but was cut short by the lights dimming and the computer projection equipment whirring to life.

“Okay,” she said, grabbing our attentions. “What I have to show you is not to be released anywhere. We’re still working on it and information cannot leave this room.”

Whoa, I thought. Was she going to show us clips of Varekai or perhaps some future show?

By then, I was on Cirque overload. We'd seen all sorts of things; felt the costumes; seen hats and masks we recognized from past shows; walked down a corridor adorned with show posters from around the world – they even had posters there for *Le Grand Tour* and *Magie Continues*! Our tour even took us by an office that we, under no circumstances, could we enter – she wouldn't let us! For behind the door exists a gold mine of Cirque pictures, articles, and tapes of their performances (you know, Cirque records their shows each night – wonder where that goes? In that room!) The office was the archive room and she dared not let fans like us in there – we'd go absolutely insane!

“What you're seeing here is our new web site,” she said, and my attention focused once again on the projection. My jaw immediately dropped upon seeing it. It was full of flash animation, colorful, whimsical and very well done. The new website will be divided into four sections, which appear through moving stars in the upper right-hand corner of the main page: *Spectaculara*, *IntraCirco*, *Odyssea*, and *Inspiratum*. Each of these selections house more elaborate animations and much more information about Cirque du Soleil and their previous site.

- In *Spectaculara*, information about all the shows from “*Saltimbanco*” forward can be found within. The early shows (such as “*Nouvelle Experience*” and “*Le Cirque Reinvente*”) aren't covered here because, as we understand, there are rights issues with some of the earlier imagery. Each show page is sub-divided into four smaller sections: *The Dream*, addressing the original inspirations for the show; *A Vision Takes Form*, talking about the show's development; *Inside the Music*, for musical influences; and *The Acts*, with a page for each individual act. Most of the content in these sections are in the form of quotes and are either one or two pages long.
- In *IntraCirco*, *Living in Our World*, Cirque provides even more. While being careful not to promise “all the answers”, this behind-the-scenes section has several longer articles covering performers and other areas of the company. Within are articles discussing the new website, *Cirque du Monde*, *Artistic Direction*, *Training*, *Casting*, and on the *Tour Kitchen*.
- *Odyssea*, the *Dreamer's Odyssey*, is the company history of Cirque told in a unique new way, kind of like a slightly-interactive PowerPoint presentation. Entering the section pops up a new window on your browser, showing the first page. The presentation is divided into 11 pages, each covering different time points in Cirque's history. Each page has a large border at the top with two photos embedded within – pointing at these pictures highlights them with additional text. The main text is below, with small very cute animations on the lower right hand side.
- Last, but not least, is *Inspiratum*. Unfortunately this part of the new website remains under construction, but Rikke tells us that something interesting will come here. The one page does have some interesting animations, with a promising note about things to come.

I tell you, this new site made mine feel like a small insignificant thing compared to what they were developing. My mind went totally numb!

After the Web Site preview we chatted a little more and Keith asked a few more questions of the CirqueClub writers. Our tour ended at the Cirque cafeteria – pretty much where it started – where we were invited to have lunch by the staff. All around us were Cirque du Soleil staff, costume makers, hat makers, shoe makers, Internet developers, performers, and yes, even show creators – we ran into Andrew Watson! We were even told that certain people (who she could not name not because she didn't know their name, but because she wasn't allowed to) were also in the building. The ladies from CirqueClub joined us and we took up residence at a huge table on the second floor of their cafe. Think of it, seven Cirque fans and three Cirque employees eating in the Cirque cafeteria! *Totally out of this world!*

At 1:00pm, we finished lunch and our time there officially came to an end. My friend had to get back to work, much to Keith's chagrin. We had to pull him away under protest!

/// A L'AVENTURE EN MONTRÉAL



The trip was an enormous success from all standpoints. Montréal was a gracious city, beautiful and majestic. We learned Montréal was “discovered” in 1535 by Jacques Cartier – an explorer. In 1642, the town was officially chartered and the founders settled along the banks of the Saint-Lawrence, the majestic river that brought them here, in 1642 determined to convert the Native Americans to Christianity.

Throughout its colorful history, Montréal has been a French settlement, a British stronghold and a bilingual city. Today, it is the largest French-speaking city in North America. Much of what they built can still be found, lovingly preserved: graceful stone buildings, stately churches, and cobblestone streets. And, did you know that Montréal is actually named for the Italian pronunciation of Mount Royal, the island's dominant feature? The “mountain” is actually an extinct volcano 232 meters (760 feet) high. Getting around was no trouble at all on their Métro system (which consists of 4 lines, each of a different color: Orange, Green, Blue and Yellow) once you understand where you're going (there are no signs in English due to Quebec language laws).





The people too were very friendly, even if they couldn't always understand English or we French! (It took me the longest time to figure out what the PFK advertisement was – Poulet Frit Kentucky or Kentucky Fried Chicken!) We found a nice place called “A L’Aventure”, a small Restro/Bar at Jacques Cartier Place. The restaurant resides in a 200–year–old building in one of the busiest streets of the Old Port area and it has a menu that is simply great. From

burgers to pizza, and steaks to seafood, this place has it all. It was no surprise that we fell in love with the place immediately. And no wonder, we met a couple of great Cirque du Soleil fans within that night after the show – Mark and Bruce from California. We'd all return to A L’Aventure again... and again!

Friendly people but hellish weather – it was definitely something to be reckoned with. It fluctuated from a sunny cloudless sky with a temperature of 13 degrees Celsius (about 55 degrees Fahrenheit) on Wednesday to a rainy, cold, and miserable day on Thursday. On Friday, the winds picked up at a rate of 35 km per hour, blowing everything about. On Saturday, the temperature was about 6 degrees C and clear skies – making for a cold night! But nothing could surpass the surprise waiting for us on Sunday morning – SNOW! Lots and lots of it to be exact! It was as if a blizzard blew in from the north it was so bad. Two of us decided to venture out in the snow and came back looking more like snowmen than Cirque fans. In spite of the weather, Varekai was and is a huge hit for Cirque du Soleil. All of us loved the show. In fact, we loved it so much that some of us saw it three times!

(We had guaranteed tickets for the showing on April 25th, but we decided to wait in standby for the show on April 26th and again on April 27th!). I recommend standby for anyone who needs a ticket to a sold out show. Your chances of grabbing a good seat are very good.



That first night in stand-by was my first and a bit exciting as Paul Roberts procured two tickets very quickly from a gentleman who was looking to sell. Unfortunately, that left us with a quandary: purchasing two more tickets! It all depended on how many people didn't show up for will call (and boy were we a sight to see hoping the masses of people walking down the pier wouldn't pick up their tickets!) Thankfully, two became available and we were in again – that was so sweet! Probably sweeter than the first night! The second stand-by night (our third attempt to see the show), however, was an adventure that none of us want to repeat. On Friday, Paul, myself and Cedric (a friend of mine) stood in line for an hour and a half with no success.

The show started and tickets were scarcely available. By the time Paul and I got to the window (you could buy two and two tickets only per person), they closed up shop and advised there were no more tickets to be had. Oh no! Seeing the show without Cedric was not an option so we proceeded to sell the tickets to a couple waiting nearby. But, as the sale was about to close, more seats became available and Paul snapped those tickets back so quickly, I thought his arm was hooked up to a bungee cord. While we missed the beginning of the show (and came in during the first act), it was still a wonderful sweet moment to be once again under the big top. Not to mention the fact that we bounced along to the “la-la’s” of the overture as we ran across the big-top grounds into the Grand Chapiteau. Sweet!



You know what else is sweet? Crêpes! Through one of our excursions to the Old Port area, we happened upon a busier alleyway that contained many different and exciting-looking café’s. We spotted “Le Keg”, “Restaurant du Vieux Port” and a stand selling various varieties of Poutine (no, no thank you); however, we wandered instead into “Shez Suzette” – a Crêperie – and boy was it delicious! I had Ham and Egg crêpes for the main course (with 100% Quebec maple syrup and a basket full of rolls). Afterward, desert came and it was hard to pick out the desert crêpe of my choice. Would it be the Chocolate and Ice Cream? Or, would it be the Chocolate and Ice Cream? In the end, it was the Chocolate and Ice Cream (I’m a chocoholic, sue me) and it was good as well! The first time I ever had crapes of any kind and here I had both meal and desert crêpes. Crêpes – highly recommended to all!



Of course, Cirque du Soleil and crêpes weren’t the only things we saw here in Montréal. Besides taking a walking tour of the Old Port area, we visited the Casino de Montréal, located on the Île Notre-Dame, at Paul’s behest. As the largest casino in Canada, it consists of three interconnected buildings. Two of these, the French Pavilion and the Quebec Pavilion, were originally built for Expo 67. The third is an annex built for the casino’s purpose. The main building has six floors, in addition to the annex and the secondary building (with four floors). Within the three structures there are over 3200 slot machines, over 115 gaming tables, Keno facilities, and large number of speed lotteries and virtual games. The casino also contains four restaurants, three bars, a cabaret, and meeting and banquet facilities. The casino is famous for its unconventional features, such as its numerous windows and low ceilings.



We also visited the The Biosphère (upper left), which is a museum in Montréal dedicated to the environment. It is located at Parc Jean-Drapeau, on Île Sainte-Hélène in the former pavilion of the United States for the 1967 World Fair Expo 67. And the Biodôme de Montréal (upper right), a facility located in Montréal that allows visitors to walk through replicas of four ecosystems found in the Americas (Tropical Forest, Laurentian Forest, The Saint Lawrence Marine Eco-System, and a Polar region). The building was originally constructed for the 1976 Olympic Games as a velodrome. It hosted both track cycling and judo events. Renovations on the building began in 1989 and in 1992 the indoor nature exhibit was opened.

* * *



So, what's next now that Varekai has been experienced? At the end of May I will be traveling to the deserts of Nevada to take in the oasis known as Las Vegas. It holds two gems in the Cirque du Soleil portfolio: *Mystère* (1993) and *"O"* (1998). These are two shows I've seen in the past but leapt at the chance to see again. For *Mystère*, I'm seated in almost front row: Section 103, Row B, Seat 13 (the 7:30pm performance on 5/24) – the exact same seat I had the last time I saw the show. For *"O"* I'm in the "splash zone" in Section 104, Row A, Seat 18 (the 7:00pm performance on 5/27). The excitement is definitely in the air and I can't wait to go! The rest of the itinerary is shaping up but is not quite complete. After Las Vegas, I will be traveling to Denver to see *Alegría* as it makes its triumphant return to US soil (June 23rd at 6:00pm), *Dralion* next in Seattle (as

well as a very special event I'll elude to more as the time is right), *Quidam* and *La Nouba* in Florida, and finishing up with *Saltimbanco* (which I have never seen live) in London. And, let's not forget *Journey of Man*, which currently plays at the Science Center, in Orlando, Florida. Ambitious? Yes... but well worth it!

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT II | LAS VEGAS



Las Vegas has been called everything from Sin City to the City of Lights, and yet it remains in the hearts and minds of children and adults alike as a fabulous place where luck favors the foolish and everyone can be young and fancy-free again. What is it about this city that calls to us? What is it that drives us to the middle of the desert? For some it's the chance to win a fortune virtually overnight, but for Cirque du Soleil fans, what draws us to this

“flower in the desert” are two of the Strip’s finest, and arguably two of the Cirque’s best productions: *Mystère* and «O».

That’s what’s drawn me to Las Vegas.

And from May 22, 2002 through May 29, 2002 the second leg of my Cirque du Soleil “Grand Tour”, which took me across the United States (and to Europe) for all currently running Cirque du Soleil productions, pulled into the desert. By visiting this vista in the desolate wasteland I would place two more productions under my belt; total score: 3 out of 8. During the week I sampled *Mystère* for the fourth time and «O» the third, but it was the experiences with both productions – before, during and after – that made this leg of my journey extra special.

Before long, I was standing outside of the Bellagio and awe at the fountains (my favorite pastime in Vegas), walk through the Mirage and smell the wonderful air scent (I’m not the only one addicted to it – eh Carol?), or watch the pirate ship *Hispaniola* battle and sink the British frigate *HMS Britannia* in the middle of Treasure Island’s Buccaneer Bay. I love Las Vegas, what can I say? The lights; the sounds; the money!





While only a year had passed since my last visit, I noticed changes very quickly. Caesar's Palace was under construction again (building the new Celine Dion theater) and the Desert Inn was totally gone (temporarily replaced with "The Steve Wynn Gallery", home to his fine art collection). But nothing brought this home more so than when I visited the MGM Grand to see the female lioness with whom I had my picture taken the year before.

For those who aren't in the know: for \$20.00 you can have one of the most unique experiences in Las Vegas if, and only if, you visit the Lion Habitat at the MGM Grand Casino. What kind of experience? Why, you can have your picture taken with one of the Habitat's lion cubs, of course! Some of whom are the direct descendants of Leo the Lion, made famous for his roaring announcement in the MGM Motion Picture Studio logo. And during my trip to Las Vegas last year I decided to take up such an experience and had my photo taken with Shawnee, one of the female lion cubs there (pictured right). The experience was gratifying – how many people can say they've petted a little lion cub? Not many I gather, and it was well worth the price of admission.



Returning to the desert during the Grand Tour afforded me another unique experience... to see how little Shawnee had grown since I had last seen her. And grown she had! I was overwhelmed to see that cute little lion cub I was able to stroke and stand with had blossomed into a beautiful young lioness. Paws that were mere centimeters wide could now be measured in whole inches! I watched with glee as she swatted a red rubber ball

around her habitat and was equally excited when she lay down to take a nap. I couldn't take my eyes off of her; I could have watched her all day. She bounced, jumped and leapt into my heart setting the right tempo for my journey.

I wondered about a couple of things as I went into Mystère and "O" too. How would Paul Bowler's absence in Mystère be handled? And, could I hear the rise and fall of the "O" stage from my front row seat? Find out...

/// MYSTÈRE, THE 4000TH PERFORMANCE



Walking into the Mystère Theater is always a treat. The Mystère Theater at Treasure Island is a one of a kind showplace built entirely for the purpose of the production. Designed by Cirque's own Michel Crête and that of Montréal based team of Scéno Plus, the Cirque du Soleil Theater provides us with an awe inspiring world — a beautiful 1541-seat space that sits within the \$430 million expansion of the Mirage Casino-Hotel in Las Vegas (aka,

Treasure Island). Rumored to cost approximately \$20 million, the theater comes complete with comfortable seats, a wonderful view for all, and an interesting story of compromise with its design. You'll find the theater in the back of Treasure Island through a couple of sets of white and red wooden doors, but you won't mistake their purpose; for beyond the ornamented doors lies Mystère, a mega-production by our favorite circus.

The theater has several interesting points about it, many of which are too technical to discuss here. However, one of the first things people notice upon entering is its ceiling. The ceiling is a cloth mural specially crafted by Sky Art out of Colorado. The print on the cloth is just as fanciful as the production below it — a fantasy map of the world with ships at sea! And hidden up in that sea of ships is an O-Daiko drum, the heartbeat of Mystère! The set, which also catches one's eye, is also an interesting piece of mechanics, consisting of a hunk of metal as a backdrop that can be rotated by a simple flip of a switch. But it isn't the ceiling or the set that immediately catches your attention; it's the two baby buggies upon the stage. What are they doing there?

Thankfully I would get a chance to stare at those buggies from close up, seated in Section 103, Row B, Seat 13, which is an aisle seat and a damn good one! The show began when Brian Le Petit (played by Brian Dewhurst) hit the theater floor in his trademarked black suit and gray frizzed hair. I was in stitches the entire time he was performing — I don't know how many people fell for his assistance! And what really had me going was after he led a couple on stage (as if their seats were actually there), he attached their tickets to a bungee rope and had them pulled up into the ceiling — just dangling enough for the audience to see them. I thought, "hey, strap me on a bungee... I don't mind!"





It was a Friday night, about 7:25pm, and I was in an extremely upbeat mood. Not only was I about to see my favorite Cirque du Soleil show, but I was also going to meet Danielle and Pierre Dubé (the Taiko drummer) after the show, and that certainly was worth waiting for. I had hoped to see Danielle before the show, while browsing the store as previously planned, but I did not spot her. Soon though, the lights began to dim

and the muttering of Moha Samedi (Nicky Dewhurst) could be heard throughout the theater, and I all but forgot about Danielle. Moments later he appeared on stage complete with his red puppet, gibberish continuing to fill the air. Until... “Hey! They don’t understand you stupid,” said the frizzy haired man from earlier, replacing the untold language (aka, Cirquish) with something we could understand. The puppet then sat up, cleared his throat, and began again: “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Cirque du Soleil!”

I was so anxious I couldn’t sit still!

“During the performance, smoke effects will be used. You, however, cannot smoke. And now... sit back, relax, and enjoy the 4000th performance of... MYSTÈRE!”

The 4000th performance?

Oh, that’s right! Prior to my arrival I had been tipped off by a really good friend within the Cirque organization that the performance I selected to attend was a historic one: Mystère was going to celebrate its 4,000 performance and there were still some original cast members on-hand to help bring the show together. And while the show continued to unfold like any other, the knowledge that I was witnessing a milestone added a little something special to the experience, especially on this grandest tour of Cirque shows. Mystère was performed virtually flawless with one mistake coming late in the High-Bar; however, the production was missing one of its signature acts: Paul Bowler and his Aerial Cube.

In previous weeks Mr. Bowler injured his shoulder (back in March of this year) and was to be out for about four to six weeks while he recovered. Unfortunately for me, that meant that he would still be out when I attended the performance during my Grand Tour. His act, while sorely missed as the start of Mystère, was replaced with a simple yet equally mysterious Strap Act, which featured a young black-haired man and two straps twisting and flying about the stage. Basically, the Strap Act is the second-half of the Cube performance itself. For a visual clue, watch the Strap Act as performed in Nouvelle Experience, one of Cirque’s earlier productions. The performer in Mystère did all the basic moves from that performance, and once he disappeared into the Deux Machina, the show went on as normal.

One of my favorite entrances of an act has to be the start to Chinese Poles. The set-up is done to “Egypte”, a very mysterious (as the name of this production suggests) song in Cirquish, that accompanies the descent of four red poles from the ceiling and the Asticots, a double-faced race of climbers, from an apparatus to the back of the stage. What makes this entrance peculiar is the way the performers move, or rather slither, to the beat of the music: a slow, haunting piece, which seems to call them from the darkness.



Another favorite performance in *Mystère* has to be the Bungees, or Elastics. Watching this performance from the second row is always a treat. Since most of their performance is done virtually over your head, it's easy to slouch down in your seat, fold your arms across your chest, and take everything in while resting your head upon the seat back. It's one of the best ways (in my opinion) of viewing that set because you feel like they're dancing in the skies just for you, especially when you catch a glimpse of the artist's faces as they dangle above you!



Other character interactions were just as nice. Watching Pierre Dubé (Taïko Drummer) go nuts in his percussion booth while singing *Kunya Sobé*, my all-time favorite Cirque du Soleil song, and beating relentlessly on a small drum, was quite a funny sight to see. There's also the Green Lizard, a scantily clad female character who is as sexy as she is inquisitive, almost sitting in my lap. There's the whimsical nature of the baby girl (who replaced Bebe Francois this night), who stuck her tongue out at me.

Watching the sweat drip off the foreheads of the Lorador Brothers (and wondering how the hell they do it night after night) was something to behold. Spotting the Asticots clinging to the theater wall was a treat, and watching them crawl up and down a space I did not think was built for it. To Brian Le Petit, who is a quick thinker, with such gusto to lasso even an energetic husband into his box of incarceration. And, finally, to one red bird who can manage to avoid a bump on the head and still balance on his hands.

With *Nouvelle Experience*, we are treated to a rebirth of our sales-man clown. In «*O*», a hot-air balloon touches down and the wind blows its deflated canvas across the stage, forever closing off the world of the aquatic to us. For *La Nouba*, a marriage ceremony is performed, uniting a princess with her Prince Charming. But for *Mystère*, a four-beat, triumphant finish summons the entrance of a giant human-faced Escargot, and the band joins the Taïko troupe with the ending song fittingly titled, “Finale.”



With an upbeat, hand-clapping, celebratory number, the entire cast circles the stage. You can see pride in their faces as they reveal their true identities. I, however, find it difficult to celebrate, as “Finale” in any language signals: The End. I find that as soon as the music ends I am the first (and only person for a good 15–20 seconds) to jump out of my seat and give my heart to the

performers — they deserved all the applause I could give. And after their final bows, I could do nothing more than to stand there and look up at “Alice,” the snail, and smile. “Words don’t do it justice,” I said aloud, harking back to an advertisement for the production, and it rings true still.

Once the show was over and mostly everyone else filed out of the theater, I made my way through the doors and out into the atrium of Treasure Island and into a mob of people. To say it was crowded would be an understatement, as patrons gathered around waiting for their chance to enter the theater for the late performance and those who had just exited were too stunned to do anything else. I spotted and met my parents, who had taken the rental car and gone off on their own adventure, near a corner next to the boutique, where we parked ourselves to look for Danielle. Before long the people started to thin and I began to wonder after a few gut-wrenching minutes to think she’d be a no-show.

But a blonde haired woman matching the description I was given approached me and asked, “Are you Ricky?” I nodded. Then she exclaimed, “Hi, I’m Danielle!” Danielle Dubé – she’d made it! We embraced for a few moments, exchanged pleasantries, I introduced my parents and we chatted for a bit. Eventually she gave us the scoop for the rest of the evening; Pierre must perform a complete third show (musically) in order to record his percussion tracks on the Sound DAT system to replace him while he was out for a week due to surgery. It meant our planned meeting after the second show was off, but that didn’t take away from my excitement. The show must go on, after all.

Danielle led us back behind a doorway to the right of Mystère’s ticket counter (between the ticket counter and the standby line). This doorway is the entrance and exit to the backstage workings of Mystère. From here the performers enter and exit at will as they come and go to work each day. It’s not the only entrance and exit, but it is the primary means of gaining access to the backstage of the production. The hallway itself is plain, tope in color, and almost devoid of activity; save for two other performers half out of costume waiting around for friends and family, no doubt. Danielle enters the labyrinth, leaving my parents and me to stand out of place in the green colored hallway.

If we had been in the theater I would have taken the opportunity to point out some of the various features to them, since they'd never been inside, but standing in the hallway didn't leave much for me to say other than we were in a place very few from the outside can venture. Moments later Danielle returned with her husband, Pierre, who had just wandered into the cast kitchen within eyeshot around a nearby corner. We shake hands and chat it up for a bit. I'm a bit nervous and my parents don't know what to do, but Pierre being the master he seems to be at meetings, he calms us all down by his hospitality and easy-going nature.

The encounter did not last very long, since Pierre had to eat quickly and return to the theater for the next set, but it was an encounter I shall never forget. It was between shows and I was thankful for the time. Pierre seemed to know me from the website (and of course through Danielle) and was very nice (had a French accent) and gracious. Before I left, Danielle presented me with a small gift – a necklace charm – that is silver colored and “one of a kind”. The item features a symbol of Pierre's Taiko drum and that symbol is surrounded by a “sun” to symbolize Cirque du Soleil. It was unexpected and I was honored that they would think of me in this way. I couldn't thank them enough.

/// THE WORLD'S STAGE, O



After the *Mystère* excursion I was most decidedly ready and excited for my second Cirque du Soleil show — «O» — on the following Monday night. I had been a bit apprehensive about watching this performance, as two previous performances of «O» had not been all that exhilarating – unfortunately my first viewing of «O» was overshadowed by a desire to see *Mystère*, which was lined up second, and the second viewing was eclipsed by worries that the show was not progressing in the order I had expected, therefore becoming concerned that favorite pieces of the show would not be seen – nevertheless I was looking forward to shattering that misconception. On this night's performance, however, I would be viewing the show from a front row advantage (Section 104, Row A, Seat 18), which I had never before experienced with this production. With this in mind I hoped the third time would be the charm.

“O” is the brainchild of Franco Dragone and Gilles Ste-Croix, and the title itself; “O” is a phonetic play on “eau” – the French word for water. And the show, like the host resort, drips with it! Set to water in a \$42 million US (70 million CAD approx) theater, “O” pays tribute to the magic of the theater – from the simplest street performance to the most lavish of operas. Anything is possible in this baroque world filled with disturbing images, impressive acrobatics and amazing technical design. The drama of life plays itself out before your very eyes within this \$20 Million dollar production.

You'll find the Bellagio Theater "tucked away in a seemingly normal looking hallway on the casino floor," but nothing can prepare you for what you'll see inside – a marvel of innovation masked by exquisite beauty and detail. And unfortunately I walked into this lovely theater still holding on to these misconceptions. Matters were not helped in the slightest when Gufia and Eugen (who I saw walking across the Bellagio casino floor just prior to the show) appeared on stage. From my vantage point I couldn't see their pre-show interactions! I couldn't see the beckoning hand of Eugen calling to Gufia nor did I see Gufia whisked from the stage, flying into the red curtain that covers the world of «O».



All I really could see was the removal of the curtain from floor to ceiling (which in itself was remarkable... I could see exactly where it disappeared to!) Consequently, the curtain impresses many who have seen the show. So, how does it work? That amazing feat is done by another winch by Fisher, a 20-horsepower F200 model that draws back at a speed of 14-feet per second! At that velocity one would imagine the curtain would flutter noticeably. But believe it or not,

Cirque keeps the curtain from fluttering with a series of weights that hold it in place timed to release with the curtain's upward motion. This keeps the curtain taught throughout the entire drawback sequence.

Besides that first bit of trouble, all my misconceptions about the show melted away as I received my first splash of water from one of the artists. It was just a little splash, but the whole experience grew from it. Did you know that even though you're up front you still cannot hear the rise and fall of the stage? It's amazing! But you can hear the creaks and strain of the overhead apparati as they are swung into place. I found that to be a little distracting but it seemed to add a level of mystery to the production, which didn't distract from the overall concept.

The stage consists of a 150-foot by 100-foot pool reaching a depth of 25 feet. While the pool itself is an interesting marvel, haven't you ever wondered how the pool becomes a stage?

Below that liquid surface lies a series of hydraulic lifts built specifically by Handling Specialty of Grimsby, Ontario. There are four of these lifts, each with a 1-million pound capacity. What's in them? Vegetable Oil! The lifts can quietly rise, thanks to tempo-sonic probes, and lower the pieces of the stage in mere seconds (5 to 25-feet per second). Those pieces are made out of a resilient rubber-like material in a series of 4-foot by 8-foot panels. Each panel contains 5,000 plus holes to allow water to pass as the stage is raised or lowered. But the speed of their disappearance and sudden reappearance can fool you into thinking that the lifts and the stage are quite light. In fact, the combined weight of the system is a hefty 460,000 pounds!



Other interesting observations are more whimsical in nature, like: Do you know how stick-like and thin Eugen's legs really are? And just how funny it is to watch the Horse-Head Man swing his butt from side to side as he walks down the stage? Or the fact that the Comets, as they run by, are just centimeters from tripping over one another, but they miraculously defy Murphy's Law

and remain upright? Or how artists slip in and out of the water with precision that just blows the mind? Or that you can feel the storm (wind and rain) during the Cadre act? Or how you get so wet from those Russian Swing performers? (Not so funny when you wear glasses and you can't see!) Or that the clowns slip by you with hardly a notice? Or that the Mongolian contortionists don't strain at all when they perform? Or that the bell on the center Russian Swing doesn't really waft a knell? Or that a Red Comet started to laugh as he picked up the mooring line from the Bateau? Or that while the angelic singer was suspended over the pool the lyrics heard didn't seem to match her lip movements? Or that the comets really do fly over the audience? Or that the paper the man on fire reads has an advertisement for "O" on it? Or how heartbreaking it is to see the piano be wheeled on stage when you're having such a good time? Or how satisfying it is to see the looks on people's faces as the balloon basket drops down and from it the curtain unfolds? Or how wonderful it is to watch the performers smile at their standing ovation?

I came away from this performance of "O" with a newfound respect and admiration of the show, even if Toumany Kouyaté (lead male singer) did not perform. I've always liked the show, but now I have found many reasons to love it. Seeing it from the front row has destroyed all the misconceptions I had about the production, and truly paid homage to the old saying "the third time's the charm." It certainly was for me and I couldn't be any more pleased.

No fan can resist the urge to shop once the show ends, and I am no exception. Since I was the last to leave the "O" Theater I was treated to a very packed B"O"utique. I braved the masses and made a couple of purchases that would allow me to take a little bit of the show h"O"me with me. Okay, I'll stop that now.

Of the purchases made, the only real mention is a metallic key-chain that features the infamous logo of the production. “Cirque du Soleil” is etched on one side with “At Bellagio, Las Vegas” on the other. I only mention it because it now shall replace the “Mufasa/Sarabi/Simba – Lion King” key chain I have been using since 1997. And that is truly a big deal in the sentimental sense.

My other purchase was the “O” raised-surface magnet. These magnets are rather nice and feature the logos of each show. This one will join my four other “memento magnets” – Varekai (from Montréal), Mystère and «O» (from Las Vegas), and the Cirque du Soleil logo I picked up in Montréal. Permanent reminders of my “Grand Tour.”

The end of the show and a brief stay in the boutique would not end my involvement with Cirque du Soleil at the Bellagio. Prior to visiting Las Vegas I had arranged to meet the new Musical Director, John-Paul Gasparrelli after the second show, thus I stuck around for the next few hours, enjoying the fruits of the Mirage Resort chain and relaxing amongst the locals. Since I had dressed up for this production (usually I do not but I felt out of place last time in jeans and a t-shirt), I did a quick-change in the parking garage. Imagine the casino security forces zeroing in on me as I changed out of my shirt and tie (and pants) into jeans and a t-shirt in plain sight. Of course, I’m sure they get worse every day, but still... I hope I didn’t cause a panic in security!



Once my shirt, tie, pants and dress shoes were ensconced in my trunk, I took up my camera and returned to the inner sanctum of the Bellagio, exited out the front door and took in the Fountains. I’ll speak more about the fountains later, but I absolutely love the fountains at the Bellagio. They’re simply stunning, and beautiful. After two showings (“Time to Say Goodbye” and “Luck be a Lady”), I tried my luck at the volcano down at the Mirage. Not only did I see it explode on the strip but a couple of drunken guys exploding all over the sidewalk. Not something one expects to see but I guess if you party hearty, expect to pay for it, ne? By the time I returned to the Bellagio, the second showing of «O» was over and patrons had already begun to file out of the theater. It was time to wait for Jean-Paul.

After waiting what seemed like an eternity, I spotted Mr. Gasparrelli as he trickled out of the Bellagio Theater. We shook hands, exchanged pleasantries and quickly retreated behind closed doors. I must say, viewing the theater in its after-show lighting is uniquely strange. First, the curtain, which is restored to close off the world of «O» at the end of the production, is gone, no doubt retracted into its place in the theater’s ceiling. The pool itself is covered in what appears to be one huge safety mat.

The house lights are raised and everything inside the theater glows a different color than when production lights are used. Probably the most dramatic is the cupola, or rounded ceiling vault. At some point during the production your eyes will dart skyward and you'll find a breathtaking ceiling washed in turquoise, indigo and blue. Not so after the production. Without the lights you can see right through to the lattice work, innovative framework of galvanized metal mesh that allows for the use of an infinite array of lighting effects as well as a space for overhead performances, which is utilized during the beginning of the show. A wench by Fisher Technical makes that performance possible. And all this you can see as plain as day.

John–Paul took me into the right–side musician's booth first, and I got a birds–eye view of what some of the singers and musicians see as they peer through the glass structure that separates them from the theater performance. The space is smaller than I thought, but still open enough to be comfortable during play. Across the way is the other musician booth, where the rest of the company plays and where John–Paul conducts. Inside that booth is an array of computerized instruments and machines that control every movement of the music of «O». Mr. Gasparelli demonstrated the camera system he utilizes to cue the show as well as explain some of the electronics used to pump the music into the theater. The technology behind it all was simply amazing. Getting a special performance of the opening number played on keyboard was also.



It was during this time John–Paul dropped a bomb on me. First, not only is Cirque du Soleil in talks to place a permanent show at the New York–New York casino–hotel, but also at the MGM Grand! This would make a total of four Cirque shows in Las Vegas — an unprecedented number! I asked whether or not he thinks the shows can sustain him. He apparently thinks so; as does Guy Laliberte, Cirque's founding father and current president.

The projections have been done and it seems Guy thinks Cirque can handle the saturation.

Other things John–Paul and I discussed were a recent appearance from Guy Laliberte, Cirque's founding father. During a meeting, it's said that one of the performers stood up and asked if the price for the show's ticket could be lowered. A gutsy move, but Guy apparently answered thusly: "You know what? No. I'm here to make money. This is a rich person's show." I found the comment interesting. Even more so than the fact that «O» was to get a new \$40,000 sound system in, which would allow the conductor to record the performance of each musician and store it on hard disk to be played if they're out.

Before long my time with John–Paul Gasparelli was over and once again I removed myself from the confines of the Bellagio Theater. I arrived at my aunt's house by 1:30am and proceeded to crash on the bed.

/// TO THE BOUTIQUES!

To many Cirque fans, Las Vegas is Mecca – the holy city. Nowhere else in the world can you see two of Cirque’s shining achievements to grace, power and elegance. And, it shouldn’t surprise anyone to know that Las Vegas also has two Cirque du Soleil boutiques, chock full of goodies any Cirque fan may want.

My visit to Las Vegas pretty much went as it did last time, in July 2001: I picked up my tickets, visited the store, and went on. This time, however, I decided to take a longer look at some of the items for sale, so our readers could have a better understanding of what was available at the boutiques – new or otherwise. In many cases items available in the Las Vegas stores are usually not available anywhere else.



The *Mystère* store, located across from the showroom, was filled with the sounds and visuals of the show. Playing on large screens in the back of the store were clips from *Mystère* alternating with clips from its sister show, “O”. The store changed very little from my last visit, but I did notice a few new items.

This spring, Cirque du Soleil released new 3-D “Raised Surface” magnets made of medium-density fiberboard. These magnets, made in Canada, are available for *La Nouba*, *Mystère*, “O”, *Dralion*, *Alegría*, *Varekai*, *Quidam* and the Cirque du Soleil logo (there was something similar for *Journey of Man* in 2000 but it has since been discontinued). Most notably the show missing from this lineup was *Saltimbanco* – does this mean that it is at its end soon? Both shops featured the logo magnets for *Mystère* and “O” as well as the Cirque du Soleil logo magnet. They are \$6.00 each and are also available through the online Cirque store at www.cirquestore.com.

The next item that held my interest was a new *Mystère* logo shirt. It is very similar to the *Chambellan* mask shirt that has dominated the Treasure Island store for a long time. But, this shirt differs from its predecessors in many ways: The first logo shirt featured *Chambellan Jr.* in blue, white and yellow (eyebrows). He is featured with his nose pointing from left to right with the *Mystère* logo at top and a green-lined box surrounding him. The second version of this shirt (beginning in 1996) shows *Chambellan Jr.* in a pose left to right, in multi colors – blue, orange, red, white and purple. This shirt is surrounded by a blue and gray-lined box with the *Mystère* logo and “Cirque du Soleil” at top, and “Treasure Island” at bottom. The new shirt keeps the second shirts pose, only the colored lines surrounding the logo are gone, and the top is replaced with “Cirque du Soleil” in smaller white letters, followed by the *Mystère* multi-colored logo.

The shirt also sports eyebrows and other facial features that have been touched up with glitter. If you want a representation of this shirt, look inside the new Quidam CD, where it shows you the other CDs available. The picture of the Mystère CD is an exact copy of the shirt (or vice-versa). Or, check out the Cirque store online at www.cirquestore.com, and find the Magnet picture, which is also the same.



Most of the shirts for Mystère are only available at the Treasure Island store. There are wide varieties available – from the \$20.00 Logo shirt to ones featuring the Chinese Poles artists (at \$26.00). There's even one or two that feature the Alexis Brother's, in one of their signature poses. What you won't find in the store is anything with the "old" Mystère pink mask logo, with the following exceptions: You can still purchase a mask that looks

exactly like the old Mystère pink mask (this mask was featured on the Mystère programmes from 1994 through 1998). You can also find a representation of this mask on a few Candles that are for sale only in the Treasure Island store. One item in the candle department did catch my eye – it was a small cylindrical glass surrounding with multi-colored candle wax inside (unfortunately I did not notice the price – it was relatively inexpensive however). The Mystère logo was etched on the glass, and while I did not purchase the candle, I thought it was an interesting piece.

The "O" boutique did not really sport anything new from my last visit either. In fact, it had changed very little since I first saw it in 1999. There were the same "O" logo shirts, the infamous group Zebras and the lone Zebra "Pose" shirts (in white, gray, and navy blue) – all at standard \$20.00 prices. But one thing did catch my eye: musical snow-globes. Inside a half-filled sphere (or globe) sits a Red Comet astride on his horse (a scene from the show). On the bottom of this item rests a turn-knob. Once turned, the globe begins to play the piano solo portion of the song "O" from the show and it loops over that portion of the song until the spring completely unwinds. I saw no other interesting items that were not either available online or hadn't been available before. I did take note that there were no new show programmes available for either show; both Mystère and "O" sported 2001 published years.



In a past issue of Fascination I mentioned that the Mystère studio CD was no longer being sold by Cirque. This is the case in Vegas as well as on their online store (www.cirquestore.com). The reason for this is simple: “It didn’t move.” Everyone, it seemed, wanted the live version for the Taiko drums, and thus the regular (old) studio CD never sold. Curiously, you can still listen to the CD through the “touch–screen” audio kiosks in both the Treasure Island and Bellagio stores. And you can still purchase the CD through online stores like Amazon.com. Speaking of CDs, I noticed that all varieties were being sold: the Le Cirque du Soleil and Nouvelle Experience CDs that are no longer being sold at the La Nouba boutique were being sold in Vegas. Also of note was that the Mystère store did NOT have the “new” Quidam CD, with the extra tracks. As for videos, both boutiques were selling all the newly released Videos and DVDs. This includes: Le Magie Continue, Cirque Réinventé, Nouvelle Experience, Saltimbanco, Quidam, Dralion and Inside La Nouba. Both stores also had another interesting item – the “Truth of Illusion” video, which is currently out of print and not available anywhere else. Not even directly from Cirque du Soleil!

Needless–to–say, my journeys through the Las Vegas Cirque stores did leave me with a little less cash and a few more souvenirs. But it was fun looking at all the Cirque stuff!

/// VIVA LAS VEGAS

But the shows and the shops weren’t all the excitement I had. One of the most interesting things about big events is that you never know what will transpire to make such a lasting impression so that it’s that one single event you remember more so than what you were doing in the first place. Like, hitting a jackpot on a slot machine...

When I’m in Las Vegas I rarely gamble. It’s not my thing, really. I may drop a quarter into a slot machine here and there, or play a roll of nickels at the nickel slots, but I can’t see spending hundreds of dollars on such a meager chance of return. Certainly there are those who have that touch, but I am not one of them. But they say everyone has their own fifteen minutes of fame and at some point their train comes in. My train, as it were, rolled into town compliments of the Luxor with what I refer to as my fifteen dollars of fame. As many who have visited Las Vegas know, slot machines can be found virtually everywhere; even in some bathroom stalls! You’re constantly bombarded with them. At some point you’re going to give in and drop a coin... it’s inevitable.

So when my mom decided to make a pit stop at one of the Luxor’s many restrooms, I sat down at a nearby slot machine. At first I wasn’t going to give in to temptation, but the more time passed, the more curious I became. Thus I took out a few nickels I had in my pocket and began to play. After losing the first two tries I won one, gaining a few more nickels than I had previously. Now, in my world, I was already a winner... I had just beaten the odds in Vegas winning back a huge percentage of money than what was invested. One should really quit there, but I did not. I continued to invest in the illusion that I could be a big winner and almost ran out of money when I won again, thereby extending my play.

For the psychologically challenged, this is how they hook you. I had almost exhausted my third bounty of nickels when I hit the jackpot... literally. The machine hummed to life, its lights flashed off and on, its bells rang, and the coin bucket began to cling and clang with the unmistakable telltale signs of scores of coins dropping. When tallied, I had \$15.00 in coin. Not bad really, considering I may have put in a total of 50-cents. So, when my mom back to join us, I presented her with a bucket of nickels!

But while I might remember hitting a small jackpot, my parents will remember me screaming like a little girl more. Let me set this one up...

How many of you enjoy being snuck up on? How many enjoy being startled after said sneak? Not many, I would wager. Well, guess what? Neither do I. Alas, that's exactly what transpired during an unsuspecting walk through of the Excalibur resort. My parents and I had wandered in out of the heat and began to enjoy the fruits of the shops when we came upon the storefront of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. While they have many locations throughout Las Vegas, at the Excalibur, you can watch them bake and glaze the doughnuts — the entire process — from the window. Many who know me personally know I adore their glazed doughnuts. Imagine my face pressed up against the window like a little kid *oohing* and *aahing* at the goodies inside oblivious as to what was going on around me. And what was going on around me? Apparently the casino has a group of wandering characters and one of them happens to be a strange puppet in a box. I didn't know this, of course, until the box came right up behind me and said something to me. Thinking it was my parents, who were nearby (but I later learned had backed off), I turned to answer. When I saw this thing I was startled, yelped out, and jumped back. Of course, my parents thought that was a hoot — “your voice jumped up two octaves!” — I certainly did not... at the time. But, after that brief startling moment I couldn't help but join my parents, and those around me, in a good helping of laughter.

So yes, you never know what will transpire during a trip that may end up being more memorable than the trip itself. Not to say that undertaking a Grand Tour of Cirque du Soleil shows isn't grand enough, but it's the little things that happen in between that make the experience that much more memorable. Memories to cherish for life.

/// CON TE PARTIRO

No reflection of Las Vegas would be complete without mentioning the \$1.6 billion dollar Bellagio. Its name means “Elegant Relaxation” in Italian (at least, according to the 1999 Mirage Resorts Annual Report) and that's exactly what you get — elegance. From the \$15 million dollar lobby, complete with a glass sculpture from artist Dale Chihuly (called “Fiori di Como”, which means “Flowers of Como”, it is composed of over 2,000 individually blown pieces), to the synchronized Fountains that reside in its lake (created by WET Design and commissioned by Steve Wynn), the Bellagio is nothing but pure grace.



It doesn't try to throw it in your face like some resorts, or rely too much on some gaudy theme. It sits there proudly above them all on the Las Vegas strip. I can't tell you how much I love the Bellagio, especially the Fountains outside. My week ended as it began – right there at the Bellagio Fountains. I'd seen and heard such productions as *One Singular Sensation*, the *Pink Panther*, *Luck Be a Lady*, and even *Singin' in the Rain*, but my favorite eluded me until the night I saw "O".

It was a clear night, with the lights reflecting off of the lake. The Bellagio itself was adorned in orange and blue hues and the sidewalks were a-buzz with activity. I had just finished shopping in the boutique after "O", and decided to catch a performance while I still had time. Words failed me as I stepped outside and took up space at the railing; the fountains sprang to life and immediately I knew they'd play my song. The beginning pattern of the water is not hard to recognize as it's not flashy or sudden; it's as elegant as the song it accompanies. And perhaps that's why I love it so much. The song, "Con Te Partiro" (With You I'll Leave) or "Time to Say Goodbye", matches the Bellagio in every way. An elegant song for an elegant display.



The voices of Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli cried out while the lake came alive with dancing water, lights and movement. My body swayed along with the motion of the water, as I sang in rejoice. I couldn't help but shed a tear or two as I watched the water of the fountains dance to the beautiful voices of its singers. After waiting so long to hear this song and to finally hear it on the one night I fully embraced the watery world of "O", my resolve was too weakened to stop any kind of emotional display.

The whole Las Vegas experience has left me thirstier for Cirque du Soleil than ever before. Unfortunately, it was "time to say goodbye" to the Bellagio, to Cirque du Soleil, and to the desert. It was time to look to future endeavors that would take me to places around the world. The next stop on my Grand Tour of Cirque shows takes me to Denver, Colorado. There, Alegria makes its triumphant return to the United States. That journey begins on June 21, 2002 and thus the mantra lives on: "Live to Cirque; Cirque to Live."

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT III | DENVER

I can't convey enough how much of a success the Denver leg of the Grand Tour was. I can't say enough how excited I was to be in Denver watching Alegría, how much fun I really had, or how much I hated coming home. And, there's still far, far more to divulge. So, sit back, relax and enjoy a few observations about the show, the Grand Chapiteau, the merchandise therein and Denver itself.

/// ALEGRÍA, OBSTRUCTED

"I'm sorry; we only have obstructed view seats available..."



Words that haunt even the least devoted of Cirque fans – obstructed view. And yet, that's what I was faced with during our first attempt at seeing Alegría in Denver. The ticket attendant, who had a nifty new Alegría logo shirt on, was patiently awaiting our decision. It was Saturday, June 22nd, and I had just come from the new Disney movie "Lilo & Stitch" with my two friends (wonderful movie by the way, I enjoyed it immensely!): Cedric

Pansky (who joined us in Montréal and is responsible for introducing me to Cirque in 1999) and Maya Abrams (a mutual friend of ours, and quite a surprise for the weekend). We rushed down to the Pepsi Center parking lot (where Alegría was set up) after the movie with a desire to see show. It didn't matter that we already had tickets for the 8:00 evening performance on Sunday, we were that anxious to be part of the experience that is Cirque du Soleil. The only problem, we didn't want our view of it obstructed. What to do?

Fans have complained about obstructed view seats before. Saying terrible things such as: "How dare Cirque sell such crappy seats" and "I can't believe Cirque would stoop so low". But would it be worth it? Would it be worth the hassle to experience the show obstructed to fan? "We'll take them," I said to Cedric, who whipped out his Credit Card and graciously treated us to the show. That decision set me off on an unplanned experience that, in retrospect, is what this *Grand Tour* is all about: experiencing Cirque du Soleil to the fullest and not always by the norm.

To give you a feel for where I was seated – the ticket I was sold was in Section 201, Row H, Seat 16, which is on the left side of the Big top, on the aisle between the lower and upper sections. My two friends sat directly behind me in 201–I–15 and 201–J–16. We were right in front of a pole. As I sat down I began to wonder if the lower ticket price would make up for the fact that a big pole was right in front of me, but I tried to make the most of it. This was the aisle after all, and perhaps a few character interactions to look forward to, right?

The lights dimmed, the music came up and “Alegría!” was proclaimed from all points. The musicians trampled by, led by the white faced, red dressed Fleur and the show began... and I forgot all about the pole (Well... almost). Believe it or not, taking an obstructed view seat was an excellent idea – for two reasons. First, having seen the show before (in Biloxi), it provided a unique perspective I had yet to experience. And if there’s one thing about this Grand Tour, it’s to experience everything possible. Secondly, I really wanted to see the show! And if there’s one thing I learned from Varekai in Montréal it’s that “standby” is a wonderful thing. Something to be exploited, er, I mean explored.



Only a few times did I find myself really hating the pole. Most of the time, the action was out front where everyone could see no matter where they sat. Especially during one performance where an Old Bird ran into an usher and the two of them ended up getting into a “heated discussion”. I guess the poor usher didn’t get out of the way fast enough! There were times; however, that I wished the pole was gone. The FastTrack performance was half-blocked; I could only see one Bronx group performing their twists, flips and turns, but not the other because the landing pad was directly in front of the pole! The Russian Bar and High Bar numbers were also hindered for the same reason. Even the Syncro Trapeze had some of its maneuvers hidden. Probably the worst effect of the pole came in the first clown act that is aptly named “Bird on a Wire.” I couldn’t even see what they were doing! But all of that was drowned away by the fact I was able to see and hear Francesca Gagnon sing.

We had reported a rumor back in the October 2001 issue of Fascination, that Francesca Gagnon left the show and was replaced by Nathalie Noelle, but that rumor was never substantiated. So, when I heard her wonderful voice fill the inside of the big top, I was completely overcome with joy! Hearing her voice made me forget all about that pole. Of course, getting a wink from her as she strutted by didn’t hurt either. Let me tell you, that gown she wears is huge. No matter how big the isle is between the 100 and 200 sections, she still had a time of it getting through there – I got a lap full of dress!

For the most part, choosing the obstructed seats was a great idea: it gave me a new perspective and a new experience. And even though the pole was a big thorn in the side, the ambiance and energy of the show was the same – and that’s all we wanted to experience anyway. First-time viewers of Cirque du Soleil shows should NOT take any kind of obstructed seats, but if you’re a veteran fan who wants to see the show again, and only has the option of choosing obstructed seats, ask yourself this: You can sit outside, or be inside where the music, the energy, and the fun are. The answer will come to you!

It was the best choice I ever made because the show was an absolute dream. It was the best time I had spent at a Cirque du Soleil show in a little while. Sure, I enjoy watching the majority of them, but I so relaxed in this particular viewing that I didn’t want it to end. We gave the performers four standing ovations before the lights came up for the last time, and I was proud of the crowd who gave the Cirque folks such a nice and explosive welcome. After *Alegría* that evening everything else seemed to be second string, except “Lilo & Stitch”, which has become one of my all time favorite Disney films. The day ended just as it began, back in our room snuggled in our beds.

/// CLOWNIN’ AROUND

One thing I tell people about a Cirque show is that you never know what to expect. Anything can happen under the big top – anything – and sometimes it takes a keen eye and quick mind to recognize even the smallest “out of place” occurrence. My friends and I had such an experience at our second viewing of *Alegría* in Denver, the following Sunday evening.



The evening was turning out quite well for us. Cedric, Maya and I had just come from a café called Paris, sipping on a couple of cold drinks (non-alcoholic, of course), when we arrived at the big top. With only 15 minutes to spare before show time, we were cutting it close! People were rushing about trying to find their seats and here were three fans lazily walking to the white Grand Chapiteau who knew exactly where they were going (and seated). Quite

frankly, we were excited about this performance due to our choice seats – Section 200, Row H, seats 14, 16 and 17. It was dead center, unobstructed, and right in front of the sound booth.

You’ll notice I said 14, 16 and 17. Unfortunately, one of the problems with Maya’s ticket was that it was not purchased with Cedric’s and mine, which I had done weeks ago when they went on sale.

Maya was somewhat of a surprise and since I did not know she'd be with us, I never got her a ticket. Hers was purchased at the big top the previous night, which caused us to be separated. As luck would have it, we were able to procure a seat for her in the same section and row we were located (200–H–16,17), only two seats to our left.

Eventually, Cedric and I got our first peek inside the tent and we noticed the tufty haired clown (Yuri Medvedev) sitting in our seats! (Actually, mine: 201–H–16). We wondered, “What is he doing there?” But, neither of us could see very well. “C’mon people!” I yelled, trying to move the masses along. We knew if we could get past this shuffling crowd, we could interact with the clown – show him our seat tickets and “throw him out” as it were. Unfortunately, just as there was a break in the line, Yuri left... and our hearts sank: What a missed opportunity!



With that disappointment, Cedric and I wandered down to our row, took the seats formerly occupied by the clown and waited for the show to begin. I took my seat next to the guy the clown was bugging without saying a word to him, or interacting in anyway. We'd be asking him to switch seats in a moment and I'd rather not say something wrong. Soon thereafter Maya joined us (she was looking through the store real quick) and we were whole again.

“Do you mind switching seats with me?” Maya asked the strange man. At first he looked confused (and there was an usher nearby shaking her head “no”), but when Maya told him she was with us (who were sitting right beside him), he agreed.

“Great! A better view of the show!”

It was then this stranger became less strange, and more familiar. I hadn't paid much attention to him up until that time. Sure the clowns were giving him the once over (apparently) before we got there, but there wasn't anything overly special about him. When he spoke, however, his Russian accent caught my attention. That, and the fact that the ushers seemed to be swarming around him like they were protecting some lost puppy, clued me into the fact that something was amiss. When he sat back down next to my friend Maya, I began to see this stranger in a new light indeed. I recognized his face and his disheveled blond hair. I turned to Cedric then and whispered to him: “That's Valery; Valery Kleft!” and pointed with my thumb. I had to explain to him who Valery Kleft was – previously a clown for Alegría at Beau Rivage and currently a clown for “O” at Bellagio, Las Vegas. When he understood that his face lit up with glee. Yes, we were sitting next to a Cirque clown!

Before we could really say anything to him the show started with the parade of musicians that so personifies Alegría. From then through the first act I was trying to think of a way to diplomatically approach Valery. It occurred to me he was there with family (perhaps his parents?) and so I didn't want to bother him. My mind was reeling so quickly that before I knew it, the FastTrack performance was in full swing. It was then I came up with an interesting and playful solution. "As soon as we break for intermission, I'm going to buy one of those Cirque clown noses," I said to Cedric. "No, two of them – one for me and one to present to Valery!"

"Ooooh, yeah!" he agreed, just as Tamir marched past us.

As he did so, Valery reached out and kicked him in the rear! I was so shocked I couldn't even laugh. Tamir turned quickly, a scowl present upon his face. I've never seen a performer kicked like that and I wasn't sure what he was going to do. But, Tamir recognized him immediately, squinted his eyes, and pointed. In turn, Valery pointed at us as the culprits (with Maya getting the full brunt of the accusation). And Maya, as quick as she is, pointed right back. By then Tamir gave up, turned around, and walked off. Now I could laugh! Before I knew it I was covered in "snow" and the first act had ended with Yuri's version of Slava's SnowShow (Slava was the original clown in Alegría who performed the unique and heart wrenching clown act). When the lights came up, Cedric and I immediately turned our attention to Valery, who had already gotten up. It appeared he was being led backstage. With him gone, the only thing left for us to do was browse the store, buy our noses and hope for the best.

You know, one of the things I said when I got really involved with Cirque du Soleil was that I'd never buy one of those cheap red clown noses, and there I was walking around the merchandise tent with one firmly planted on my nose... making a complete fool of myself. But boy was it fun! Everyone was looking at me – some of them pointing, some laughing, some embarrassed for me ("Why?!"), but all seemed to enjoy the antics. The best thing about it was that I had an Alegría shirt on, I was silent and milling about the crowd – I was just part of the show!

Cedric even got into the performance before the start of the second act, with his own red clown nose. What a sight we must have been making our way back into the big top with red clown noses on! In any case, we returned to our seats with Maya in tow, and plunked ourselves down in hopes Valery would come by before the lights dimmed. If we could get his attention for any period of time, I'd point to the clown nose on my face, point to him, and extend my hand out with the second clown nose in it – for him!

Sure enough, Valery returned with his guests, sitting down next to us just as the lights dimmed (rats, another missed opportunity). The singer in white strutted her way around the audience, stood right next to us (with our clown noses on), looked down in a surprised fashion at Valery, and extended her hand to dance. As she did so, Valery quickly fumbled with something around his neck (no doubt a special VIP ID) and tried to stuff it underneath his shirt before...

“Oh my god, she’s taking him up on stage!” I whispered to myself.

Valery Kleft looked like a giant amongst the smaller company of performers, but he took to the dance well. In true Cirque clown fashion, he put on a pair of dark sunglasses, wrapped his arms around the singer, and the two danced the number away. Even the strong man didn’t seem inclined to take him away. When Valery returned to his seat next to us, Maya reached over and whispered in his ear: “I think you know her,” she said. To which he answered: “Oh yeah!”

By the time the show ended (with a few more character interactions – one of which was an “Old Bird” who’d come to dust off his head), we still had not gained Valery’s attention. Do you know what? By that time we didn’t care. The show was excellent, our fun had been had, and we had such a great time “clowning around” with the patrons leaving the show we didn’t give it a second thought. One of the leaving VIP members even asked us if we were in the show! (How’s that for recognition – Cirque here I come!) In a way, we were part of the show. And we came away from Alegría with another unique memory that will endure, even if we didn’t get a chance to say hi to our clown neighbor!

/// VIVA L’ALEGRÍA!

The Grand Tour is many things. It is a fulfillment of a dream yes but, as the weeks have gone by, I have come to realize it is also a creature of sequence, cycles and moods. I felt it as each segment of my journey has concluded. But sometimes the grandness that I assign to this task overshadows even the smallest and most interesting coincidences that have cropped up. And as I took off from Orlando’s International Airport I had time to contemplate such things.

For instance, did you notice that the start of this leg began on the Summer Solstice, one of the longest days of the year? June 21st. And that gave me some pause; that dawn, half-way around the world, the morning sunrays were shining down upon Stonehenge on the Salisbury plains, creeping up on a stone called “the Heel Stone” and creating an illusion that the sun (the soleil!) was balancing on that upright bit of rock. I find it amazing that whoever created Stonehenge knew of such things — the motion of the heavens; the natural cycle and rhythms of our planet — to make such an observation, and then put that observation to good use. I also found it startling that in less than six months I too would bear witness to that natural monument first-hand, on my very first trip to Europe, bringing a close to this grand adventure, but beginning another grand journey anew.



That wasn't all my mind fell upon as I sat, stuck in an aluminum airframe thousands of feet above the surface of the earth. While the June 21st of today was the beginning of a new adventure, a June 21st of the past was the ending of another. I shall explain: when I was growing up all I wanted was the opportunity to travel through outer space. In elementary grade school, I took to science like fire to oxygen, and found I had a burning passion for all things space. That fire fueled my desires of becoming an astronaut someday, and thus my first ever career goal was born. The rest of my primary education focused on that goal and I became more and more knowledgeable about space science, energy, geology and chemistry. On June 11, 1989 I took my first steps into "training" for my new career by attending US Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. While only a weeklong adventure, Space Camp turned out to be exactly what I needed. I trained just like the astronauts trained (though, nowhere near as intensely, obviously) and learned many of the systems that powered the Space Shuttle, and other past NASA initiatives. I enjoyed myself so much that I went back for a more intense and in-depth program two summers later in June of 1991.

Combined, the two weeks compromised much of the month of June — June 11–16 (Camp) and June 16–21 (Academy). And while my motivations in life have changed since I was younger, I still honor a dream that I was able to live out by "celebrating" those two weeks each year. Thus it is with an interesting notion that I should be flying about the country on the culmination of that celebration; June 21st.



So, what can I tell you about Denver? Contrary to popular belief (and mine as well) the place is not currently burning down, has burnt down, or is in any danger of burning down. The fires did, however, place a shroud over the Rocky Mountains so I never really got to see them in their splendor. But, that's okay, there was another "snow" covered mountain I wanted to see: the white Grand Chapiteau of Cirque du Soleil, perched within the parking lot of the Pepsi Center – Downtown Denver.

Ever since I saw a picture of this amazing big top on a Saltimbanco programme some time ago, I wanted to see it. Who wouldn't? It's the granddaddy of all Cirque big tops. It seats (quite comfortably, I might add) 2500 people, is climate controlled, and really cool! (No pun intended) Probably one of the first things that caught my attention was the merchandise tent. Unlike the Blue and Yellow big tops I have experienced thus far, with their dual and separate merchandise tents, the Alegría big top surprised me with their set up. Did you know they are actually joined? The concession stands are set up where the normal merchandise shelves would be and in the middle (which in the normal Blue and Yellow big tops would be unused, and courted off space) exists the merchandise! This whole setup covers Doors #1 and #2. So when you exit at Intermission you step right into the gift shop!

At either end of the gift shop are two concession stands, a set of chairs and round tables, and video screens previewing all the creations of Cirque du Soleil. Over these concessions is a unique structure I had never seen before – flying birds. Fashioned out of what appears to be steel, and painted white to match the tent, is a metal wheel that spins with birds depicted in various modes of flight. It was an interesting item to find in the middle of popcorn, cotton candy, M&Ms and Coca-Cola.

The merchandise they had was also top notch. A brand new Alegría logo shirt was available (in all sizes) for \$25.00. The “raised” logo magnet was also available for \$5.00. A new North American Tour Programme (which is the same as the last printed Asia-Pacific Tour Programme) was available for \$11.19. Even the Alegría DVD was available for \$29.00. Interesting items abounded: like a beautiful lantern fashioned out of metal (quite heavy in fact) that is a “tea light candle”. It looks exactly like the round lanterns hung throughout the big top. Each is hand-made and not available on their website. The price, however, was not noted.

Many agree that Alegría is Cirque du Soleil’s signature show. Once can’t help but think that Cirque “admits” to it themselves as a show they hold quite dear. It comes as no surprise that the performance is top notch, a cut above the best. While I was immersed in the power struggle that is Alegría, I made a few observations:

- Francesca Gagnon sings! Fascination reported a rumor that Francesca was replaced by Nathalie Noelle, but that rumor was never substantiated. So, when I heard her wonderful voice fill the inside of the big top, I was completely overjoyed! She sang for our first Alegría outing (the obstructed one) and hearing her voice made me forget all about that pole. Of course, getting a wink from her as she strutted by didn’t hurt either. Let me tell you, that gown she wears is huge. No matter how big the isle is between the 100 and 200 sections, she still had a time of it getting through there – I got a lap full of dress!
- Batmunkh Batjargal (Bachka) has grown! He plays the Little Tamir character... and he’s not so little anymore! He’s playing an Old Bird now as well during the Strong Man number and is quite good at it. Consequently, he didn’t perform in the Russian Bar act like he normally does (with the single flip with another performer). I’m not sure why, but both shows I attended did not have this performance by Bachka.
- The Flying Man! (Alexandr Dobrynin) – What can be said about this amazing act that wouldn’t be an understatement? This guy is simply amazing! While the pole severely hurt my perception of his act, hearing Francesca sing the wonderful song that accompanies this performance made up for it. By the second night (when we were dead center), watching him jump out at us was simply amazing. Which is why the Flying Man is one of my most favorite acts in Alegría (an oddity, considering I don’t like many “aerial” acts).

- Those feisty Old Birds! I knew the Old Birds were supposed to be mean– spirited, but were they supposed to fight with the ushers too? The first performance we attended, one of the Old Birds actually was pushing ushers out of the way – and got into a heated “discussion” with one. I guess the poor usher didn’t get out of the way fast enough. That’ll teach him, eh?
- Manipulation! Ever since Elena Lev left Alegría, I had wondered whether or not the new Manipulation act would be as good. And you know what? It really is just as exciting! Taking cues from Elena Lev’s corner, this new young woman bends and contorts while using a hula–hoop just like Elena Lev did. And, she even does it while fluttering a yellow ribbon! How’s that for talent? She even uses Elena’s old costume described as: “that sexy skin–tight gold bodysuit Elena wore on her first tour and in Alegría Le Film...”

Unfortunately, the time must come when the lights brighten, the show ends and you must go home. From the squeaking of the Russian Bar performer’s shoes as they ran out on stage to the way the Fire Dance guy lit his torches (by tongue!), Alegría was an amazing show. Whatever bad karma that shrouded my previous perception of the show (thanks largely to my not–so–great Biloxi experience) has been totally washed away now. Alegría, for me, is so powerful, so full of greatness; I’m not sure how to express the feeling. All I could do was stand up and clap and clap and clap – through four curtain calls (both shows!). And now? All I can do is listen to the music and relive one of the best experiences I’ve had.

Believe it or not but next month I get a small reprieve from the demands of the Grand Tour. The month of July I spend home in Orlando recuperating from all the money spent thus far. From Airfare, hotel, travel and tickets: \$2600.00 in US currency. That is more money I have spent for anything thus far and the Tour is not even half over, oh, but what I have gained! New friends and new experiences to lifetime – with the promise of more to come!



“Journey of Man” continues to delight audiences at the Orlando Science Center, so I think I will take in another viewing of that wonderful performance while it can still be seen on the big screen. In August, I continue my journey in Seattle, Washington where fellow Fascination! Writer (and very good friend) Keith Johnson and I will be seeing Dralion. What excites me more about that upcoming trip is the wedding I will be partaking in – a Cirquish extravaganza. Stay Tuned!

*There is a Love in me Raging.
Alegría!
A Joyous Magical Feeling.*

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT IV | ORLANDO



For many Cirque fans who have made a home on the Yahoo! Groups Cirque list, July 7th has been marked a special day. The day is referred to as “Cirque Day” and many celebrate it as they would a national holiday. Why July 7th was chosen out of all the other days of the year for the most part is unrecorded, though we know that “Cirque Day” has been celebrated each year for the last three years and is the creation of Cirque fans worldwide. This being the case I also celebrated this very special day by taking in a little more Cirque than usual. And, with a lull in the adventure, I could celebrate “Cirque Day” in style by taking advantage of a unique opportunity – to see Journey of Man, Cirque du Soleil’s IMAX production (for the third time) and La Nouba all in the same day.

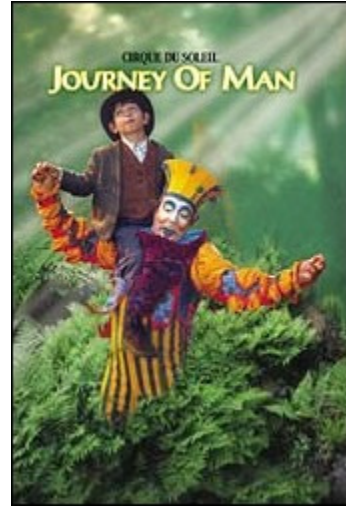
The time away from my travels also opened up an interesting time to gather insight on my journey: where I’ve been, where I am, and where I will be at its completion – put in terms of the status of my Cirque du Soleil fandom. It isn’t often that I think of such things, or share them, but what better day to examine them than on “Cirque Day”? What grew from this self evaluation was a wealth of knowledge about myself and the perceptions of where I am, and I am compelled to share these insights with those who have followed me on this incredible journey thus far.

/// A JOURNEY OF MAN

Journey of Man was first seen in 2000 across the United States and Canada in the IMAX 3-D format. It is Cirque’s first gamble in large-screen filming and is widely held by fans as a shining tribute to innovation and excellence. I was first introduced to this Cirque masterpiece in February 2001, during a trip to Miami to see Dralion. I had seen it most recently in March of this year with a couple of friends of mine – introduced to Cirque only a few months back. I was overjoyed when I heard that the Orlando Science Center was picking up the film for display and could not wait to see it again. While it had been released on DVD, there’s something to be said about seeing it in a real theater.

But Journey of Man at the Orlando Science Center provided a unique viewing experience. First, the performance would not be in 3D, as it was throughout most of the IMAX houses it performed in. Second, the film would be shown on a curved dome instead of a flat IMAX screen. That projection changed the dynamic of the production in many ways. For instance, in an IMAX Dome (referred to as an OMNI-Max Theater), the film is wrapped around you – above you, below you, and to your right and left. You're not just watching it, you're living it. And believe it or not you can succumb to motion sickness while watching films on a dome theater. Seeing Journey of Man in this format was not only a challenge, it was cool!

One of the difficulties one finds when a standard IMAX film is projected onto a dome structure is the sense of stretching that goes on. People, places, and images become distorted, wrapped around the landscape they're projected upon. This was the case for Journey of Man. In many scenes (like the Banquine and Vis a Vis), the absolute power of these acts were somehow removed by the distortion effect. More so with the Banquine than any other, especially noticeable during Serguei's amazing jump-flip to the top of a tower three people high. The feat itself is still remarkable but it lacks scope when one sees him bent out of proportion at the top of the dome. Strangely enough, the acts that benefited from this distortion effect were the Taiko drumming piece, the Synchronized Swimming (you actually feel like you are swimming with the artists) and the Bungees (which seem to come from all angles to grab you).



While the technical aspects of the performance are exciting to explore, it's the remarkable large-scale story of Journey of Man that caught my attention more so this time than in any previous viewing. In order to accurately convey the scope of the Journey of Man story, I quote a passage I wrote for our second issue, in late 2001: "The story of "Journey of Man" is larger than life. The canvas used to paint the tale is humongous — an IMAX screen. Using 70mm film, this 38 minute Three-Dimensional adventure enlightens our senses with an imaginative allegory about the passage of life — from birth to maturity."

It was the scope of its message that particularly hit me. On screen I was watching the journey of a single man through life and it occurred to me right then that his journey is not unlike my own. No, not the same journey of life, but one of maturity. In my case: the maturity of a fan. For the first time I began to question my fandom in Cirque du Soleil and whether it would sustain the same level of excitement, commitment and enthusiasm seen in the past. Immediately I thought of the Grand Tour of Cirque I was now in the middle of and wondered how it fit into the grand scheme of my evolving Cirque du Soleil fandom.

In a quest to understand my feelings, I began to debate myself and soon a question popped up: “What’s next for me?” It’s a very interesting and valid question to ask one self, especially in the stage I am in at this moment. It brought me to terms with my aging fandom in Cirque du Soleil putting it in a perspective I hadn’t seen before. It is also a valid question – what will happen after I see Saltimbanco in January? Saltimbanco is the only show I have not seen live, and after that my journey will be complete. I will have seen all there is by Cirque du Soleil, experiencing it firsthand. What more do I have to give? What more will there be for me to do?

I think one of the most compelling questions that came out of this brainstorming effort was “would the thirst still be there after my tour is complete?” At this point I cannot answer that question. The answer is one of the great mysteries of this adventure I think, one that I hope I will find upon returning from London. Certainly one cannot be expected to stay involved in something with the same level of passion and gusto as when he first entered it, is he? And would you think less of him if it wasn’t? Again, the answer is not easy to find. But, I have found that my fandom in Cirque du Soleil has changed over the past three years; from “Uber Fanatic” to “Obsessed Fan” to a more “Seasoned Fan”. And I was frightened of that fact, thinking I was getting “Cirque burnout” until I really sat down and investigated what made me feel that way.

In the end, I discovered that even if I don’t feel compelled to listen to Cirque music 24/7, watch the DVDs once a week or even browse the official Cirque site on a daily basis, I’m still an enthused fan who enjoys the performance, the allure, and the chance to keep his “youthful” innocence. I’m a seasoned fan now and you know what? It’s cool. I no longer have to worry about my level of commitment; to keep the same intensity of my fandom to be happy anymore. And while I can no longer recapture the innocence of my first show, I can live with the fact that things will continue to change, season and mature. I now know that this is not a bad thing... just a natural aging process that we must all undertake – in life, and in the things we do. As for the question of “What more is there for me to do?” Well, we’ll just have to wait and see what Cirque cooks up for 2003!

/// LIVING IT UP, LA NOUBA!

You never know what you’re going to get when you walk into the Cirque heater at Downtown Disney. You might find yourself wandering in the boutique (as I did), or you might find yourself taking in a performance of the show (as I also did). Depending on the crowd you could wind up with a mediocre show, a good show, or a mind-blowing experience. As I walked into the La Nouba Theater the night of July 7th, I wondered what kind of crowd I would find. I hoped I would get a real energetic crowd to mirror my experience with the show back in February, but I knew right from the off that it wasn’t going to be an overly exceptional night when I saw many empty seats (in the extreme sides, upper section) and found an audience who didn’t laugh at the instruction of where the exits were, though they found the scream during the “In case of an emergency,” spiel quite a... uhm... scream.

Since I couldn't count on the audience to provide a really energetic atmosphere I began to wonder how the show itself would be presented. As with any staged event the more the audience is into it, the more energetic the performers seem to become. But with the audience not really responsive, I knew that I wouldn't be enjoying the show... not really. Leaving the audience behind, I turned in my seat to prepare for the great character introduction piece. If anything could get the audience into the show it would be their introductions. But there too I noticed something that would change my entire outlook of the show. No longer was I in "show enjoyment" mode, I was in "critical observation" mode, watching everything play out to determine if other changes had been made.



It was originally reported that the Festival of Characters that begins the show had changed, more specifically that of the trumpeteer. Instead of the sound of a lone trumpet to begin the characters' introduction, the show was augmented with an accordion. I can say with much relief that the trumpeteer is back and the lone sound of this brass instrument once again rings true – and it sounds just as good as ever!

That lightened up my spirits and allowed me to observe a few other changes without the gloom of the audience participation (or the lack thereof).

Believe it or not, the show has another set of Diabolo girls. The last time I saw the show I could have sworn they were new and now I am sure of it! These new performers are quite tiny, but still as cute as ever. Their size aside, their performance seemed rather fresh – so fresh that their timing was off and the production not as high-paced as usual. Thankfully, that didn't stop the audience from kicking in the loudest ovation of the evening (when they bothered to stand at all). Probably the funniest moments of this new performance was the action of the Les Cons, who had to place the tiniest girl on top of their pyramid to close the act. She was so tiny that she couldn't get up there by herself!

And speaking of those nutty "Les Cons", in all my times of viewing the show (8 in all now) I have never seen them so, how to put this, nutty! In my opinion, I think Cirque just lets them run wild, actually. I had more fun watching their antics and their interactions with the show than I did watching the show itself. I mean, at one moment, they were actually singing along to the music (not the lyrics, the music!) How nuttier can you get?

I've said it before and I'll say it again – nobody can replace Dessy and O'Neill; their stamina, their vocal range, or even their enthusiasm. When I saw the show back in February there was much trepidation over how the new singers would be received. I said then that both singers seemed to fill the shoes left by their predecessors well. This latest performance, however, leads me to revamp that assessment a little. Neither of the two seemed rather enthused, or inspiring. Perhaps it was the crowd or perhaps it was the mood I was in. After all, when I'm in "observation" mode I tend to be a lot more critical.

Last but not least La Nouba has a new clown – Sergei is gone (the shorter hearing-impaired clown). He has been replaced by another man. While they pretty much do the same performance, the new clown doesn't seem to have the same sense of timing and this throws off all of the clown acts. The clowns also seem to be more touchy/feely than usual; the new one especially. I saw him actually sitting with people in the higher sections, even following them to their seats. Even Balthazar was chasing after people (that was uncharacteristic of him). With the new clown comes a new solo clown act (to replace Sergei's two chairs). This clown comes on stage with a "small" suitcase. He unlocks it and out comes another suitcase – a smaller one. He unlocks that one and out comes yet another smaller case. He unlocks that one and out

comes... a harmonica! The sounds of a clown playing a harmonica (badly, by design) fills the theater for a moment before... (you guessed it)... he swallows it. Panic strikes the stage for a moment while the Doctor buzzes in (namely, Balthazar dressed in a white gown with a red cross painted on it – and flashing red lights on his shoulders to mimic an ambulance). Balthazar beats the harmonica out of his counterpart (a strange version of the Heimlich maneuver) and once again the theater fills with the putrid sound of his harmonica. The only problem I found with this new act was that we no longer get to hear Krystian (Le Titan) slap his forehead in frustration (which he did when Serguei couldn't get the chairs off his arms). This is a small thing, but wholeheartedly missed as one of the funniest parts of the show.



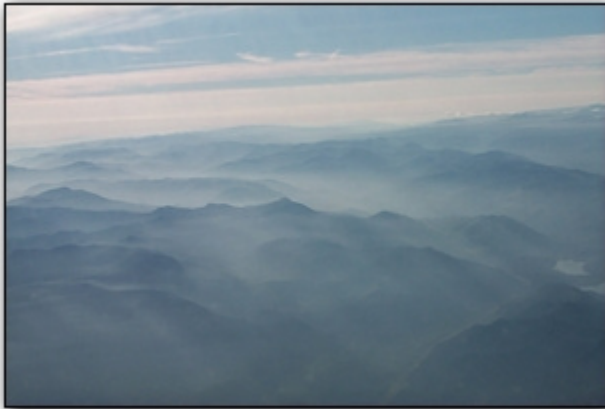
While I was at the show I found there was a new La Nouba programme (finally!) and immediately got my hands on it. But, before you rush off and purchase the newest version, the new program looks just like the older versions. The unnamed bald man with his black hat raised in greeting, with a trio of performers dancing on his head, still punctuates the programme's cover. This allegorical picture is the poster image for La Nouba, whose orange-scripted logo appears prominently down at the bottom of the cover.

It's the inside that interested me the most.

And thankfully, there are changes on the inside as well. While many of the cast shots remain the same, there are a few that have been modified or re-shot all together. Among the new or updated photos you will find are a new picture of the Cleaning Lady, now played by Denise Gray (from the United States), new pictures of the Cadre act – as Marylene Hickok has a slightly new costume (it has changed from black stockings to white, changing the overall color), a new profile shot of the clowns that is reminiscent of the opening clown act (featuring Serguei fallen over a blue box), shots of the new musicians in pose, and cast shots of La Nouba's newest singers: Isabeau Prouix-Lemire and Odessa Thornhill.

All in all I am rather pleased with this new programme. Finally we are able to see some of the updated costumes in photo form, and see some of the new cast members in action. With this being only the third programme since La Nouba's inception in 1998, this update was severely overdue. The new programmes are available in the Cirque du Soleil store at Downtown Disney West Side.

/// NEXT UP?



Next month, the tour is on again and this time I have a new outlook on what it'll mean to complete my own journey of man. In the later part of August I will be going to Seattle to catch a performance of Dralion – my third performance of the show, and to take part in a very special event: the wedding of Keith Johnson (fellow Fascination! staff writer) and his fiancée LouAnna! What an interesting Cirque-y wedding it shall be!

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT V | SEATTLE

What if the stars could sing?
If they could, would you listen?

Once Upon a Time...

*Where Kings are fools and fools are kings.
Horses ride free, and love is in bloom.
Two wandering souls – Quidam and Alegria
Come together to stupor their despair and gloom.
A Cosmic council; a conspiracy at rest.
And now, you see them... Certainly you jest?
Come one, come all... to this orchestrated mess
The time is now — Transformation at last!*

/// A DRAGON, A LION, AND A HEADLESS MAN

Dralion is said to be the fusion of ancient Chinese circus tradition with the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil. Its creativity draws on the culture of two worlds, personifying their civilizations with two icons – a Dragon, representing the east; and a Lion, representing the west. The combination of these separate philosophies – Dralion – is thrust into a plane of existence that is neither past nor future. This realm is maintained by the four natural elements: air (Azala), water (Oceane), earth (Gaya) and fire (Yao). Together they weave a haunting tale on this ethereal plane, a celebration of life, where the seeds of creation are sewn and our imaginations born. Yo! Put down the incense Ricky and get your head out of the clouds because you're headed to Seattle!



On Friday, August 16th, I hopped a plane from Orlando to Seattle to take part in an awesome, once in a lifetime event – it was equally convenient that Dralion was also playing there. And since I'd never been to Seattle before, or anywhere in the Northwest corner of the United States, this trip was an exciting proposition right from the start. Cool air and blue skies greeted me when I stepped from the airplane and it was refreshing indeed.

Okay, who am I kidding – it was dark, late, and by the time I landed in Seattle I'd been in the air for seven hours. I was tired, grumpy and my neck was killing me. Ever try sleeping on a plane? Makes you feel like a contortionist doesn't it? By the time I picked up my luggage at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SeaTac), I had been up for the equivalent of 24 hours (give or take thanks to the change in time zones). But, Keith Johnson was there to lend a helping hand, orienting me to the Northwest and steering me in the right direction – to a bed!

Keith was the reason why I went to Seattle in the first place. You see, he was getting married to his fiancée, LouAnna, and his wedding was going to be far from ordinary. Taking inspiration from Cirque du Soleil, and with Cirquey costumes, music and a story line, the wedding was going to be unlike anything I had witnessed before or took part in. And indeed it was – complete with an appearance by a headless man named Quidam (played by me!)



The costumes were hand-made and represented elements (and colors) of the cosmos: *Söl* – The Fiery Beast, shedding light on those who are in despair (dressed in reds and golds); *Luna* – The Wandering Companion, a counterpart to the sun who lives in doubt and shadow (in silvers, blues and blacks); *Mohä* – Mother Earth, the force that grinds the wheels of time (in greens and browns); *Momo* – a playful sprite, the innocence within us all (a colorful rainbow);

Iris – the celestial balancing force, bringing order to this universal chaos (in reds and greens); Quidam – The Conundrum, realizing there is more to life, but unwilling to seek its transformation; *Chambellan* – The Groom, frolicking about the universe as if it were his; and *Alegría* – The Bride, a single expression of unequivocal delight.

LouAnna (who made the jacket for my costume) and Keith (who used an ingenious method to make me appear headless) helped to brilliantly bring *Quidam*, the character I played, to life. Together, these characters heed the harrowed cries and manifest themselves; setting their cosmic contrasts aside to weave a tapestry of harmony and unity. And to illuminate the path of this blessed union was music sampled from various Cirque du Soleil sources, such as: the “Overture” from *Journey of Man* (as the wedding’s overture, “Reveil” from *Quidam* (animation), “Kalimando” from *Mystère* (the groom’s procession), and “Kamande” from *Dralion* (Charivari), and piped in through a sound system and timed to allow the theme of the wedding to marry with the music.

The wedding “back-story”, featuring how the characters came to take part in the ceremony and how *Chambellan* and *Alegría* (the Groom and Bride respectively) met and was crafted by me and edited by Keith and LouAnna.

It was presented in an 8–page full–color Program, patterned after a Cirque program book (it even had “Cast Photos” in the back) and was simply marvelous! Here’s just a sample of the wedding’s theme excerpted from the “show’s” Prologue:

Welcome to a place where the world’s a stage and the stage is our world; where wishes are horses and love is in bloom. If that were true, would you ride?

Come one, come all! Where a man’s heart searches for fulfillment; his life mere existence. If that were you, would you wonder is there nothing more?

See here, see her! A keeper of joy, kindness, compassion, love; alone, yet dancing a bright ballet of promise. If that were the woman of your dreams, would you not ask for her hand?

Gather ‘round! Gather in a Cosmic chorus that brings the two together; Witness the transformation of their universe. If that brought lovers en masse, would you object?

*What if that were all the world?
If it were, what would you make of it?*

And the cake! The cake looked like the Varekai big top (complete with blue and yellow swirls, merchandise tents, fences and patrons). It was unreal (and delicious)!

* * *

Having been the only person unable to attend the rehearsal the weekend before (and hadn’t been able to practice any motions in costume before hand), I was unable to even think about sleep until I had heard the music queues, tried on and fitted the costume, and seen the other costumes and final concept pieces. When I was finally able to get to bed all I could think about was the wedding... hoping I didn’t mess up!



The ceremony was held in their back yard the following afternoon (Saturday). The weather throughout the day was wonderful (a big worry for Keith). The morning was crisp and cool; the skies clear. The afternoon reached about 80 degrees Fahrenheit with little to no humidity (Oh did I enjoy that!). By nightfall, the weather turned a lot cooler than I was used to (good thing I packed warm clothes!) but I enjoyed it ever the same.

And I did well – it went off without a hitch! Here’s how it all played out:

Act 1: The Beginning

The audience is set in their seats. The stage is devoid of people and objects except for one thing – a pedestal. The pedestal is empty, waiting to be a receptacle of a magical icon – a profession of love. The music cues up... a mysterious piece announcing the arrival of Quidam. He stands poised at the entrance (end) of the isle, ready to make his way down front.

Act 2: The Proposal

Quidam, with umbrella open and in his left hand, walks down the aisle with an object in his right. It is a glass slipper (reminiscent of “Cinderella”), set upon a soft pillow. He firmly, but cautiously, carries the item down the aisle to the stage. When he reaches the stage, Quidam turns to the audience for the first time and presents the slipper. He bows left, then right. After, he turns back to the stage and places the object upon the pedestal. As he does so, his theme ends (rather triumphantly) and the soft song of birds fills the air.



Act 3: Chambellan and Alegria

The change in music startles Quidam and he eventually turns back around to be confronted by the Best Man and Groomsman. He bows to them, and slowly makes his retreat to the side. With Quidam no longer the focus, the Best Man and Groomsman take their place (facing away from the audience). Chambellan (the groom) and the rest of his party enter. He, in a red, blue and yellow colored mask, but he too does not acknowledge the audience. As Chambellan approaches the stage, he turns to beckon the call of his bride: Alegria (Eugen Style). And then, she and her precession enter the ceremony.

Act 4: The Transformation

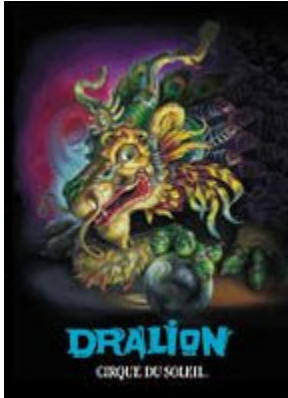
The wedding vows take place. During which, Chambellan will have the bowlers hat in hand. As the ceremony commences, their masks melt away (a.k.a. removed). The Groom, now fully transformed into a Human Bing, has united with his live. They are one. The masks, the last remaining tie to their pasts, are discarded. Married, the bride and groom waltz back down the aisle and the parties leave as they entered, silent and revered.

Act 5: The Closure

Once again, the song of birds fills the air and Quidam returns center stage. He looks down and forlorn that he was unable to make the transformation as Chambellan was able to. Then, as if to admit defeat, he faces the audience fully, grabs hold of his umbrella and folds it up. Tucking it under his arm, he struts away from the hat and stage. Moments later he disappears from sight...

* * *

On Sunday the entire wedding party was treated to a spectacle of a different sort. With Dralion in town, the happy couple had arranged to attend a performance to cap off our Cirquey weekend. The entire wedding party reunited (out of costume, of course) to share in the experience. It would be a first time viewing of a Cirque show for many of the wedding party's compliment, and a first Dralion viewing for the Bride and Groom. Since I was able to catch Dralion twice when it swung through Miami, Florida in the winter of 2001, I already knew what to expect.



While Dralion was my first live touring show (I've since seen Quidam, Alegría, and Varekai on the road) it has not always been revered as the most exciting. This is a sentiment echoed by many long-time Cirque du Soleil fans. That's not to say that Dralion isn't a fun show, because it is, it's just not always on the level of some of their previous shows. Regardless of my thoughts about the show, I was anxious to experience it again and see what changes – if any – had occurred. And there were changes: Agnès Sohier still has authoritative control over the singing duties; despite the fact that a new male singer has been hired and is singing in the show (the programme credits his name as Beaver).

Having heard Erik Karol and Frank Irving sing the parts in their distinctive falsetto voices, her renditions of certain songs didn't translate well. Songs like "Stella Errans" and "Miracula Æternitatis" didn't seem to project under her feminine, though powerful, voice.

Other noticeable changes were in the clown trio. The clown in the beige overcoat has changed and is now being played by a man named Philippe Aymard (France). He does an excellent job of picking up the role originated by Joe De Paul (Canada) and played by Blas Villalpando (Canada) in Miami. In fact, the entire wedding party was treated to some of his antics when he taped us all up (in his mind, creating a safety bar) from one end of the row to the other! The other clown duo consisted of a bald headed man (Colin Gee – United States) with a tuft of hair parted in a comb-over. He is dressed in a suit and appears to be fat (he has a belly). Attached to his left hand is a bowling ball, which he has a devil of a time trying to get off. His friend (Gonzalo Muñoz Ferrer – Chile) is a scruffy looking man who also appears "fat". Both have been with Dralion for a while; Gonzalo Ferrer originated that role when he joined Dralion during the Miami engagement. Interestingly, his bald headed sidekick was then played by John Gilkey (who later left to partake in Varekai).

They weren't the funniest of clowns but they were effectively able to tickle my funny bone in a humorous and touching original skit. Colin Gee, who has taken over John's old role, takes center stage in this particular piece where his character is repeatedly hit in the face by his protruding belly. The exaggerated motions he goes through (and replays in slow-motion) were enough to bring the house down. But the act turns from laughter to confusion when he "dies" from this apparent attack and his partner fusses over him.

During this fuss (and attempt to resuscitate the clown), Colin's stomach begins to glow and he "rises from the dead". At this point I lost the entire purpose of this skit until he began to ascend into the sky (via the rotating ring that is a prominent feature of the set). The clown act ended on an emotional low note but its purpose became clear with the next act – the haunting Spirits.

One of the least applauded acts of Dralion is the Spirits I think due to its placement between the clown act and the Aerial Pas de Deux. It was almost as if the act was not meant to be applauded. The music for the clown act quickly changed to "Miracula Æternitatis" then quickly into "Ballare" for the silk act. I know the audience was confused; I was sore because I wanted to give them a nice round of applause!

Unfortunately that, in combination with a lot of little things, tainted my overall view of this performance. Things like... the absence of the Teeterboard act, a lack of a cohesive start to the show (the kid with the lamp is missing – probably thanks to the theft in Portland), only one "dralion" climbing onboard the ball to roll it from one side of the teeterboard to the other (when all four of them had done so in previous viewings), and a general overall lack of enthusiasm by the performers. Of course, there were many positives that came out of the performance too. Things like... finally being able to see the Hand-balancing Act live and hear the song accompanying it (in Miami, it was replaced with the Aerial Hoops act by Geneviève Bessette), seeing the Umbrella Act live (which was replaced with the Contortion with Bowls act in Miami), watching the bald Victor Kee do his thing and then perform in solo drum act at the end!



The merchandise tent also had a few new items: a new Programme, a new Poster T-shirt (in line with the new Alegría, Quidam and Varekai shirts), and the 3D Raised Magnet – all of which I purchased. As I left Dralion and Seattle I couldn't help but feel a little like Guy Laliberté (Cirque's leader). There's a statistic in one of the earlier programmes stating that in one specific year he boarded 92 planes and spent 311 hours in the air. While the "Grand Tour" won't equal that figure, I couldn't help but be reminded of that as I had boarded my 15th plane of this journey... with many more to come!

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT VI | TAMPA BAY

Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to 2003!



It's been a tumultuous yet wondrous year we've left behind in 2002. In the world of Cirque du Soleil we've seen the return of Quidam and Alegria to the North American continent, allowing many fans to see these shows live for the first time. We also witnessed the birth of a new touring show – Varekai, and were treated to a mountain of rumors surrounding two other shows, one of which is set to debut later this year. Through it all “Fascination!” has

been there and I, on my Grand Tour, have experienced most of it. I have been able to “live it up” as it were, taking my mantra of “Live to Cirque; Cirque to Live” to a whole new level.

/// INTO THE UNKNOWN

Throughout 2002 the Grand Tour has taken me places I had never before been and allowed me to experience things I only dreamed of before. I consider myself fortunate to have lived this dream thus far and found it gratifying to share it within these pages. For those who have been with me since the beginning, I thank you. It has been a long road that I hope you have enjoyed hearing about. And for those who are just joining me... welcome. For what the Grand Tour is all about is one man – one fan – on a quest to see all of the Cirque's creations in the span of one year.

Thus far The Tour has taken me to cities all across North America. It began with Montréal in April to witness the premiere of Varekai, Cirque du Soleil's latest touring production. Next was Las Vegas in May to take in the monumental creations of Mystère and “O”. Third, to Denver in June for a viewing of Alegria, which had just returned to North America. It was back home to Orlando in July, where I celebrated “Cirque Day” with two shining examples of their ingenuity: La Nouba and Journey of Man. Lastly to Seattle, where the Dralion roared and a very special “Cirquey” wedding took place.

As the summer came to a close it seemed that, no matter what, nothing could stand in the way of this Grand Tour. And then October came and I was dealt an enormous blow — I lost my job. I didn't lose it out of stupidity or having done anything wrong, no, I became yet another victim of the slow-down in the U.S. economy. Another statistic in the unemployment line. The news came on a holiday weekend (for residents of the United States that would be Columbus Day) and it was a weekend that cast doubt on the conclusion of the Grand Tour (10 days in London/Paris and my first viewing of Saltimbanco) and the rest of the trips I had planned for 2003: Varekai in Atlanta, Cirque 2003 in Las Vegas, Alegría in Seattle, and various others.

On top of that, Quidam was returning to Florida and I held tickets for two performances. This was the next event on my Grand Tour and it really came at a good time, because for the first time since hearing the news of my unemployment, I was able to set it aside for a good two hours of Cirque goodness. What was more important was being able to see the show one last time before it set sail to the Land of the Rising Sun – Japan.

The first performance was on November 24th, for which my mother and I held tickets. The performance was rock solid for a Sunday afternoon, which I've been told is the roughest day for a performance. It didn't matter that the Vis-à-Vis act did not perform or that John didn't do his hat-rack act that afternoon (a bit I didn't realize was missing until hours later on my way home.) I was pleased to see Shayne Courtright perform the German Wheel masterfully and watch Elena Lev perform hoops with all her scrumptious moves. I dare not go too much into the show since we have covered it quite in-depth this year, but watching Quidam, regardless of the omissions, made me happy. And I was glad to share the experience with my Mom who is not a big Cirque du Soleil fan, but I'm trying to win her over.



The second showing of Quidam was to be on December 5th, but a sudden fall by Natalia Pestova (Spanish Webs/Character) in that afternoon's performance put a damper on the festivities and Quidam turned frightening. It would seem that I wouldn't get a chance to see the show one last time after all since that evening's show was ultimately canceled. But by then I had too many other things that were calling my attention: I held tickets for The Lion King Musical on Tour in Tampa, My friend Cedric was coming into town from Denver, Two Towers (Lord of the Rings) was coming, and The Lion King animated film was about to premiere on IMAX and other Large Screen Cinemas. These were important events in their own right and things I had long waited to happen.

By a stroke of fate perhaps it was fitting that my last day on the job was Friday, December 13th (yeah, Friday the 13th). It was a day I had both welcomed and feared. It is a strange feeling to be ready to leave one's job, but I wanted to so I could get on with my

life. I didn't know what kind of life I'd be able to live, but as a person who always tries to look forward I knew whatever life I was destined for I would embrace it fully. There was the trip to London to see Saltimbanco that still hung in the balance, and the clock was ticking. When I pulled out of the parking lot from my place of business a familiar song came on and it reminded me that all things must come to an end, but that end is only the beginning of something more. The song was "Finale" from the *Mystère Live* CD and it set up a bittersweet moment for me as I pulled away from a job of almost seven years.



So now, like Simba in *The Lion King*, since that fateful day I have found myself searching for my place on the unwinding path that is life. I've decided to begin that search in Europe. That's right: the trip to see Saltimbanco is still on! And that means within a few weeks the Grand Tour shall be completed – all 8 productions (and one film) within the span of one year. But that's not all... instead of just visiting London and Paris as the original 10-day trip was conceived, I've decided to join my friends Cedric and Maya for an entire month in Europe! How's that for an explosive conclusion to an awesome journey?

London, Edinburgh, Paris, Nice, Geneva, Florence, Pisa, Rome, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Amsterdam, Brussels... these are some of the cities on what has to be the boldest leg of the Grand Tour to date. This will be my first time in Europe and I am so excited I could literally burst! I'm all packed (well, sorta) and ready to go. The journey begins on Friday, January 17th and ends on Sunday, February 16th and once again the Grand Tour will take me to places I have never before been and experience things I have only dreamed of. The only problem is... I'll miss "Fire Within!" See you in a few weeks!

Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT VII | LONDON

“Mind the Gap... Mind the Gap... Mind the Gap...”

With my daypack on my back I threw my suitcase across the gap between the platform and the train, minding that gap as the recorded message advised, and joined the pack inside the train just before the doors swooshed shut and the train sped off to its next destination. I cleared the sweat from my brow then, wiping it off with my sleeve, and let out a sigh of relief. It had been a long journey from the airport to the Underground but I was finally there – an American in London indeed! How I got to London and why I was there is a bit of a story but let’s not rush things. First, I have to be honest and say I was extremely excited to be in London, or anywhere for that matter, considering what could have been a disastrous turn of events for this leg of the Grand Tour – my untimely unemployment. But let me just say that it couldn’t have come at a better time! I turned what could have been a nightmare into one of the best trips of my life – a full month in Europe. And it all started right in London!



/// A EUROPEAN FLAIR...

I have to be honest and say that the journey from the States to the United Kingdom was my first Trans-Atlantic journey and the first time I ever stepped foot off of the North American continent. Having confessed that I will tell you that this trip will not be the last time I step away from my country and leave the North American continent behind. There was too much fun to be had in Europe and while I didn’t get quite enough time in all the stops my friends and I ended up making, I had fun just the same exploring what I could. And that’s what it’s all about, no?

For the record my flight departed Orlando in the late-afternoon hours of Friday, January 17th with an arrival time at London-Gatwick the following morning at about 9:30am (with a stop-over in Atlanta, but that’s not exciting). Being that this was my first flight across an ocean I was a bit apprehensive. I mean, what if something would happen? Even if it did I don’t think I’d get a chance to use the seats as a flotation device (like the card in the pocket in front of me said). Honestly, I didn’t think about it... even if it was the longest non-stop flight I’d ever taken in my life (that is, from Atlanta to London, just about 7 hours).

What did I do? Well, for the most part I fiddled with my laptop whenever appropriate – writing notes about future Fascination articles and other interesting things I’d like to research. I also looked out the window a lot, but even that wasn’t so interesting, as it was quite dark by the time I left Atlanta. But even so catching the outline of the United States in electric light does rate as something cool to see. I tell you one moment I saw towns and cities interconnected along routes of light and then... nothing, it was total blackness. Everything was consumed by the darkness of the water. By then all I wanted was to be consumed by the darkness of my eyelids, which proved to be harder than anything else! I tried at least, but it’s hard to sleep in “economy class”. As I said before I’m not a contortionist after all. Thankfully though salvation came about 7:30am London Time when a nice meal was served: a warm croissant with a banana, bread, crackers, orange juice, a fruit bar, and preserves. I completed the ensemble with a spot of tea. Well, two spots actually, but who’s counting.

Before long the plane was on the ground at Gatwick and the next adventure was about to begin – immigration, customs, and baggage claim! But in order to do that I had to first get to the terminal. It seems most incoming flights to Gatwick have the plane pull into what I’ve dubbed a “parking spot” out in the middle of the tarmac where passengers depart by walking off the plane the old fashion way – down a flight of stairs. Once you were on the tarmac you were ushered into a bus and shuttled to the main terminal where you’d go through customs and immigration followed by baggage claim. Quite an ordeal just to arrive, no?



I was all set with everything I needed to get myself quickly and painlessly through immigration, but do you know I had to get an arrogant Brit? One who was just hell-bent on making someone’s life miserable? Indeed I did! He questioned everything and had rude remarks for just about every answer I gave him. If it weren’t for the fact that there were signs everywhere stating that hitting an immigration officer landed you in hot water (geez, it’s no

wonder they have those signs... they’re irritating!) I would have done it – he was that irritating and rude. But after showing the information he needed my passport was stamped and I entered the country – finally.

I collected my belongings in baggage claim after and booked passage on the Gatwick Express to Victoria Station, a hub of rail, Tube and coach. Victoria Station opened up the world of London to me where I could get to my final destination but let me not bore you with those details. What you’re interested in, I’m sure, is how Europe was? Am I right? Okay, okay... to tell you the truth I never wanted to come back from Europe at all. Last time I mentioned a whole slew of cities that were on the itinerary to visit – London (UK),

Edinburgh (UK/Scotland), Paris (France), Basel (Switzerland), Geneva (Switzerland), Nice (France), Florence (Italy), Pisa (Italy), Rome (Italy), Venice (Italy), Vienna (Austria), Prague (Czech Republic), Amsterdam (Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium), but in reality I would only make it to a hand-full of them – there wasn't enough time!

Of the cities listed above, my friends (Cedric and Maya) and I made it to London, Paris, Firenze (Florence), and Praha (Prague) for any extended period of time (approximately 5–7 days in each location). I ended up visiting Pisa and Roma (Rome) by myself for day-trips and we did change trains in Vienna and Frankfurt, but we never left the train station so I didn't really get to visit those cities. So, how did I find the cities I was able to visit? They were brilliant! For those who have been to these countries and the cities I speak of, you know the culture and history that is in abundance there. For those who haven't I can't explain to you what I felt being amongst buildings that are older than my country or explain to you the amount of history that exists there. Every city has its own history and it was so wonderful to experience it all.

Well, I tried to experience as much as I could and with the time allotted, I saw and experienced some wondrous things: I climbed up all 530 steps to the top of St. Paul's Cathedral, saw the Egyptian, Roman and Greek collections at the British Museum, walked across the Tower Bridge about four times, saw and heard Big Ben, ate at the Original Hard Rock Cafe (where I got to hold one of Jimmi Hendrix's old guitars), found myself in the middle of an

Anti-War March, and took a train out to see one of the most magnificent stone monuments there is: Stonehenge. Nothing can prepare you for seeing Stonehenge... it's a magnificent sight to behold (even in the rain, which was how I experienced it).



In Paris, I rode to the top of the Eiffel Tower, saw priceless works of art at the Musee du Louvre (including Venus de Milo and Mona Lisa), walked through the Tuileries and down the Champs-Elysees (enjoying the Virgin Megastore there), stood atop the Arc du Triomphe, tried to visit the underground lake at the Paris Opera House (see "Phantom of the Opera" lore), paid my respects to Victor Hugo at the Pantheon and watched out for Quasimodo while in the Bell Tower at Notre Dame. I even made it out to Disneyland Paris where the best Pirates of the Caribbean ride exists and bid my farewell (again) to the Main Street Electrical Parade!

Firenze, the birthplace of the Renaissance, was our third stop. It was amongst the Italians that I saw the statue of David at the Academia (Big Guy!), met up with my biological father whom I had not seen since I was about 12 years old (I'm 25 now, you do the math), saw the Leaning Tower of Pisa, walked through Boboli Gardens on a beautiful sunny day, and went to Roma completely on my own taking in the Colosseum, St. Peter's Square, Trevi Fountain and the Roman Forum Ruins. That's quite a bit of history already... but we didn't stop there.



In Praha, the famous Charles Bridge, Prague Castle the Astronomical Clock in the Old Town Square awaited me. The Clock, which is a very sophisticated 15th Century clock, not only shows the time but the revolutions of the sun, moon, and stars. It also consists of "12 medallions representing the months of the year and the 12 medallions of the zodiac." Quite a fancy clock and a must see on anyone's trip to Praha. As you can tell I was quite taken by it, and I won't even give away what it does every hour!

Europe was everything I thought it would be and more. I had such a wonderful time that... I'm already planning my next visit. I'm not sure when that will be because I have a lot of places that I want to see and experience within the next few years, but I hope it is soon. What I do know is

that Europe opened up a thirst to complete another goal of mine, one I set at the onset of this Grand Tour – the globe. And thus the Global Tour is on. Where it will take me is unknown at this time, though I have my sights set on Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa among many other interesting destinations.

Next time will be the last you'll hear from me regarding the Grand Tour, but I want to take the opportunity to sum it all up. To give it meaning and to answer any last minute questions anyone may have regarding it. I may even have an answer to the question I posed last summer – what more is there for me to do in the world of Cirque du Soleil?

/// I AM LEGION, I AM SALTIMBANCO!



A trip to London is never complete without taking in the West End – the theater district. My journey was no different and while in London I took in Phantom of the Opera (at Her Majesty’s Theater), The Lion King (at Lyceum Theater), and Les Misérables (at the Palace Theater). And while Phantom and Les Mis were wonderful productions I am certain you are most anxious to hear about the original reason I ended up going to London in the first place – Saltimbanco.

Saltimbanco, currently Cirque du Soleil’s oldest touring show, is described as being a “celebration of life” and I heartily agree. Its colorful kaleidoscope of images, characters and themes continue to weigh in on the times, providing us all a new vision of what life can be: optimistic and peaceful.

I found Saltimbanco within the formidable Royal Albert Hall, a venue built in 1871 as a concert hall. Set amidst this posh, expansive performance space was the familiar playing field of Cirque: the stage, musician’s platform and multi-colored ceiling. As I took my seat along the far side (with Cedric next to me and Maya in the row ahead of us) I was able to observe my surroundings – and its shortcomings – with greater ease.

I looked out across my viewing field and sighed, it was anything but excellent. It appeared that I was in a makeshift seating arrangement on the floor of the Hall – the front of the stage was not as close as I would have liked and my side view was cut off because the sides of stage rose above my head. I would have been able to see under the stage (or walk under it, it was up that high!) if it hadn’t been curtained off with black felt-like material. Even there I was denied and it was painfully obvious that I was being punished. Here I was stuck in the corner with the opportunity to see the semi-circle of the stage only! To make matters worse, directly in front of me was a rigging apparatus. It wasn’t a pole so it was easy to see through, but the ropes that ran down to it traversed my viewing field. In a sense I’d be looking at the show through bars. I felt trapped in my seat and the limited viewing capability it brought. I could barely see the musicians play! What a way to see a show for the first time...

Before long the pre-show festivities began. Like all Cirque du Soleil shows, a variety of characters and clowns make the rounds of the big top to “be of assistance” to those seeking their seats or just to cause a commotion. Saltimbanco was no different in this regard... perhaps with one exception – there were more characters and much more mayhem! Neither Cedric nor I knew what characters had made their appearance because the laughing and carrying-on were happening on the other side of the stage in a location we couldn’t see. But soon we’d snap our necks to our immediate right when we heard shuffling underneath the stage. Something was about to happen... we just didn’t know what!

And then I saw it... a sneaker. Then two. They were small and white and tapping. What they were doing behind the black curtain was beyond the two of us when – pop – out came a face; it was a “worm”! And then another! And another! One by one the masked “worms” came out from under the stage and invaded the theater, each waving, nodding and generally looking around in confusion. From the other side of the stage then were the Saltimbanques, the partygoers of Saltimbanco. Together these characters created such chaos throughout the theater that Cedric and I heard laughter for the rest of the pre-performance! At one point, the Saltimbanques commandeered a row of seats in the front seating section and sat down. When the ringmaster, propped upon the multi-colored ceiling, voiced his opinion on the matter, they all yelled back and held up tickets! What a riot! But I tell you; once the real show started we were treated to a wonderful performance – and that bad seat I was in melted away. From the moment Kumbalawé began to the ending of Horéré Ukundé, I was entranced by the music and enthralled by the movement. Below are some observations I made about the show (and don’t forget it just so happened that next to me was a doorway into the underworld of the show!)



- Saltimbanco was originally supposed to follow a specific “running order” of: Opening, Adagio, Chinese Poles, Clown, Double Wire, Juggler, Boledoras, INTERMISSION, Russian Swing, Duo Trapeze, Clown, Hand to Hand, and Bungees. Unfortunately the Duo Trapeze and Double Wire did not perform. Instead, in the place of the Double Wire was the one-man Diabolo act and in place of the Duo Trapeze was the Solo Trapeze performance.
- An energetic fellow performed the Diabolo act by the name of Mitchell Head and at first sounds rather strange to be a one-man act – especially in a Cirque setting. But the performance was very well done and quite thrilling! One of the tricks this artist performed was an overhand catch of the diabolo using only the sticks and rope strung between them. It was so quick that if you blinked you would have missed it! The act was performed to a piece of music I had never heard of before.
- The Single Trapeze was performed by a young artist named Anna Ward to a piece of music entitled Cantus-Mélopie. Her performance was a slow sensuous dance routine perfectly timed with the slow melody of the music. I loved the costume and I loved the music but her performance did not capture the audience, or me. And that’s a pity.
- The cover to the service platter that is brought out at the beginning of the show did not contain the blue and yellow stripes of a big top. The dome was a representation of the Royal Albert Hall instead!

- There's only one thing I can say about the clown: Oh my God. While it would have been a blast to see Rene Bazinet perform Eddie, Jesko Von Den Steinen from Germany played him brilliantly. Not only did he have Rene's signature squeak down but he was so hilarious that he had the entire hall in stitches. He performed this "stuck in a bathroom" routine that simply brought the house down! And, of course, the gun fight.
- The Juggler was an energetic young woman who performed quite well and pleased the audience. Though, her act came right after the Diabolo act and it seemed as if there was too much "juggling" like acts in a row. Especially since Boladeras followed her.
- The Hand-to-Hand performance by Andrezej Piechota and Tomasz Wlezien was top notch. This pair performed many maneuvers I had not seen before in a duo Cirque act such as this... and it was a refreshing performance to see. Watch out Lorador Brothers... these guys can give you a run for your money!
- Russian Swing was infectiously fun. Even if it isn't as spectacular as the version in "O" or the daring version in "Varekai", the Russian Swing in Saltimbanco is still very, very fun.
- Intermission came right after the Boladores and it didn't seem right. There was no ceremony of sorts to introduce us to the fact that there was an intermission coming, like in Quidam (with the balloons) and Alegría (with the snowstorm). So it was very strange to have the lights suddenly rise after the act had ended. I can tell you I was very confused and even had to consort the free show guide that was stuck in my seat.
- Watching the riggers do their job throughout the show was a real treat. All the checks and re-checks I watched them go through were simply mind-boggling. All the safety wires seemed hand-controlled and the ropes that raise the performers from stage to sky were also at the hands of the riggers. I remember vividly watching the rigger during the entire Single Trapeze act – the pulling and letting go of her safety rope during the performance and the riggers' bobbing up and down as she dismounted, providing her a smooth descent to the stage floor. Even some of the performers (on their off moments) came down to help with the rigging. And that I thought was very cool!
- Speaking of the rigging, the center structure must have taken quite a bit of thought and time to construct. The ceiling is awfully high in the Royal Albert Hall and there was no construction or support for them to build from. The result was a series of cables criss-crossing across the ceiling that supported the central bar and foundation for acts like the Trapeze and Bungees to work from.

Saltimbanco was a magical performance and I was thankful that I could finally see it live. Unfortunately, I have to agree with some and disagree with others to say that the show is ready to have its final curtain call. It's a beautiful show do not get me wrong, but it is a show that has been eclipsed by many other great Cirque shows in form of theme, technique, presentation and acrobatics. Perhaps it was the fact that the venue didn't seem to suit Cirque at all. Or, perhaps it was the poor viewing seat I had. Regardless of the view I hold of the show at least the three of us had a great time – Maya most of all, as she had one of the Saltimbanques sit next to her during the show's finale!

"I am noble and rogue, mortal and sorcerer, fire and water, power and grace. I am celestial and eerie, playful and mischievous, subtle and striking, magnificent, androgynous. I am spirit and body, shadow and light, sublime and grotesque, somber and afire. I entrance and mesmerize, fusing madness and wisdom, primordial chaos – soaring, teetering, slithering. I am fluid, poetic, hypnotic, dancing, whirling, and flying. I am rebellious, defiant, and explosive. I am one, I am many. I am as we are – eternal, out of time. I am science and magic, chimeric, ethereal. I come from nowhere. I come from everywhere. I am a creature of neither fantasy nor reality, neither incantation nor dream. I am neither man nor woman, god nor demon, song nor story. I am no one. I am legion. I am Saltimbanco."



Le Grand Tour



SEGMENT VIII | HOME AGAIN

This is it, my friends. The end of Le Grand Tour has finally come and this column will be the last in its series. For those of you who have followed my adventures from the very beginning, you might have an idea how very sad this is. I have shared my adventures as they have happened — hopping from show to show and place to place. You know this journey, this Grand Tour, has been all about my quest to see all of Cirque's creations before one year could pass. That was the challenge; that was the goal. And now it's done, it's over. The culmination of months of planning and almost a year spent executing the tour has finally come to an end. It is with some irony that I have brought the Grand Tour full circle, having spent a wonderful evening at Varekai in Atlanta on March 8th. What a way to bid farewell to this extraordinary event, no? To be where it all started at its very end?

/// FULL CIRCLE

At the beginning I said I wasn't doing this to become an ultimate fan or prove that I was the ultimate fan. This still reads true today. The Grand Tour has been an amazing journey that has extended my knowledge of the world, expanded my Cirque du Soleil fandom and provided a sense of purpose to my life. It's a journey that I sometimes do not have the appropriate words to express, but now that I'm at the end of this incredible experience I have found that I feel somewhat different — a bit wiser perhaps. It's a feeling that is very hard to describe. There's a sense of accomplishment but also one of emptiness. It's as if a huge dream has been fulfilled (and it has) and now I'm left wondering, what's next?

Of course, I could never have guessed how many people I would meet and make life-long friendships with over the span of this past year. There's Keith Johnson and Paul Roberts, whom I first asked to join me on a project called Fascination! I met them for the first time face-to-face during this past year and they have been close and valued friends. There's Gary and Jill Chapman, who some would call the ultimate tour fans — having finally met them in Montréal. There's all of you, our readers, and dozens of folks I can't mention. You all have made this Grand Tour what it has been: a wonderful experience I shall never forget!

So, in order to bring closure to the Grand Tour I thought I'd attempt to answer a few lingering questions. Some of them I brought up to myself as the tour went on and others I've had asked throughout the year. But I've held answers until now because the final answers weren't available. But now, if you'll bear with me, I'll attempt to answer them all!

Q. Where did the Tour take you?

The Grand Tour made seven stops along the way, allowing me to see cities across North America and Europe (many of them for the first time). A summary of the journey is below, as well as the dates and the shows seen on each stop:

1. Montréal (Varekai): April 24–29, 2002
2. Las Vegas (Mystère & “O”): May 22–29, 2002
3. Denver (Alegría): June 21–24, 2002
4. Orlando (La Nouba & Journey of Man): July 7, 2002
5. Seattle (Dralion): August 16–19, 2002
6. St. Petersburg (Quidam): November 24, 2002
7. London/Europe (Saltimbanco): January 17 – February 16, 2003

Q. What was the cost involved?

Having been in a position whose job it is to analyze data, I kept a record of the cost of the Grand Tour as it happened. Since you want to know how much it cost to make this dream a reality I’m prepared to share those figures. You might want to sit down first. Not that it’s hundreds of thousands of dollars but it did cost quite a bit – for one person. To tell you the truth I was pleasantly surprised and amazed at how I was able to keep the costs relatively low (compared to my estimations).

*) Montréal = \$1075.20	*) Travel Cost: \$2529.42
*) Las Vegas = \$607.87	*) Show Tickets: \$509.10
*) Denver = \$637.33	*) Other Costs: \$3425.50
*) Orlando = \$80.00	
*) Seattle = \$361.16	*) GRAND TOTAL: \$6464.12
*) St. Petersburg: \$140.00	
*) London/Europe: \$3562.56	

As you can see, the GRAND TOTAL of the tour weighed in at just under \$6500.00. The column to the right shows where the majority of the money was spent. Travel Cost is the total of the Airline and/or Train tickets needed (this does not include the Chunnel tickets from London to Paris and back, but does include the Eurail Pass). Show Tickets includes the total cost of all Cirque tickets purchased. Other catches the left-overs like Food, Lodging, Souvenirs, and other expenses on the trip.

Q. What expectations did you have before starting? Were they met?

Many of the expectations I had were general – would I have a good time, would I easily be able to get money there, would I be able to use my laptop, would I be able to afford it, etc. Since I was visiting many places for first time, first-time jitters were most common. Not surprisingly I found that you could get cash virtually anywhere and it was easy to exchange funds from American Dollars to British Pounds to Euros to Czech Crowns and back again.

I found that I could use my laptop, and did so on a daily basis to write a journal, download my pictures (and view them) and even played games just before bed. I also found that the cost was lower than expected. I had estimated at least \$5000.00 alone for the European leg with an overall cost of \$8000.00 or more for the entire Grand Tour. I suppose that if you compare that figure with the relative cost of a family of four at Disney world (per person), I rather lucked out. All my expectations were met brilliantly and any trepidation I have about going overseas again has completely melted away.

Q. What experience was most memorable?

Each leg of this journey brought with it a new experience. Home base for me is Orlando, Florida, and while I have been in many cities and states across the Eastern United States, my travels west have been somewhat limited. This year brought me to cities across the continent that I had never before visited: Montréal, Quebec, Denver, Colorado, and Seattle, Washington. Each of those stops has provided me a trove of memories and experiences I will treasure for the rest of my life. And let's not forget some of the places I have been before, like Las Vegas, Nevada and St. Petersburg, Florida. They're just as exciting and memorable!

For example, the chance to play a Cirque character (Quidam) at Keith's wedding ranks as one of my most memorable moments from the tour. Getting to watch the fountains at the Bellagio over and over and over before and after "O" was exciting (not to mention leading my parents, for whom it had been 20 years since their last visit, around Vegas). In Europe, I'd have to say the Coliseum (Roma), the Leaning Tower (Pisa) and Stonehenge (Salisbury) rank as some of the more memorable. Let's not even mention the fact that I saw priceless works of art and architecture throughout Europe. In fact, many times I was so overwhelmed with the sense of history there that when I got back I found my soul was empty. There isn't that rich sense of history here in the States that I found throughout Europe.

Q. What events do you think will outlast time?

Wow, that's a good question. I mentioned some of the most memorable, and there's no doubt that they'll last the test of time. But there are less impressive things that made an even lasting impression. One of them happened after my friends and I watched Phantom of the Opera in Her Majesty's theater, London. As we were walking out to the tube station I spotted a man huddled up against one of the walls of the theater. He was elderly and obviously homeless. Whether we want to admit it or not we rarely think about the homeless, and I'm guilty of it too. But that night something about that old man struck a chord in me and it took many days for me to forget him. He shook in the cold as he huddled himself up. I wondered what happened in his life to place him there and how a society as rich as England's can allow such a thing to happen.

Q. Now that you've experienced all the shows, what's your favorite?

I've never kept it secret that my favorite show of all time has been, is currently and will be *Mystère*. But, with that in mind I haven't always been able to rank the shows from what I feel are most strong to least strong. With the conclusion of the Grand Tour I am now able to do so and answer that question once and for all. Of course, this list will change as new shows come out but as of this moment, I would rank the current shows as follows:

- | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1) <i>Mystère</i> | 2) <i>Varekai</i> (tie) | 5) "O" | 7) <i>Saltimbanco</i> |
| 2) <i>Alegría</i> | 4) <i>Quidam</i> | 6) <i>La Nouba</i> | 8) <i>Dralion</i> |

Q. Do you still enjoy Cirque du Soleil?

One of the questions I asked myself back in July when I was forced to review my status in the Cirque du Soleil fandom world, was this very question: would I still enjoy Cirque once I had seen them all? The answer is... YES. But not necessarily for the reasons I thought of then. Today I have a better appreciation for each troupe and how the show is put on, but moreover, the fact is I have a little different perspective on the world, arts in general, and how Cirque du Soleil as an art form has evolved. But my view of Cirque du Soleil and my relationship to its fandom will always be one of change. As I mature so will my views of it and how it is perceived. Right now I am still as involved as ever but not necessarily for the corporate aspect of it or to see what makes Cirque tick, but to appreciate each performance and to show the performers just how much I appreciate their efforts.

Q. Would you ever consider doing this again?

In a heartbeat, without doubt. I would do something like this again without hesitation. Perhaps it wouldn't be as grand, but I know my traveling days are not yet over. In fact, they're just beginning! One day I'm hoping to return to Montréal to explore the city's history more than I was able to last time. I'm flying to Seattle in August to visit Keith and take part in a one-year wedding anniversary party (not to mention *Alegría*). I'm still hoping to get to Las Vegas for *Zumanity*'s premiere but that looks less and less likely. And you never know what might come my way... Then, there's still Japan, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the various other places I still want to see!

And the magic continues...