

# Running away to join the Cirqueis

**'It's like a drug,' says one of the Passionates about the object of her devotion -- the Cirque du Soleil. ALEXANDRA GILL meets the Deadheads of the big top**

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Vancouver — Some people collect stamps, other follow their favourite rock band with a passion bordering on zealotry. There are fans who have seen the film *Titanic* hundreds of times, and those who travel to *Star Trek* conventions all over the world.

Now there are Cirqueis, a new breed of fan who live, breathe and plan their vacations around the touring productions of Cirque du Soleil, the avant-garde acrobatic troupe from Montreal.

"It's like a drug," says LouAnna Valentine, one of the organizers of the CirqueCon 2004, the first unofficial gathering of Cirque du Soleil "Passionates," which took place in Vancouver last weekend.

"Being able to step into an experimental dream for two hours -- one that combines athleticism, state-of-the-art technology and stagecraft, emotion and heart, it's addictive," Valentine gushes after Saturday night's performance of *Quidam*, which continues at Concord Pacific Place until June 13.

Among the 31 Cirque fans who were here for the weekend, there are some who have been to more than 50 shows. Other than for the red noses and floppy clown hats that Cirque du Soleil handed out as gifts, it would be impossible to identify these fans in a crowd.

They are young and old, families and couples. They came from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, California, Louisiana, Georgia, Virginia, Florida and even Tijuana, Mexico. They met each other through an on-line fan club called Fascination!, which can be accessed at Richasi's Le Grand Chapiteau ([reedycreek.azlance.com:16080{tilde}richasi/Cirque/](http://reedycreek.azlance.com:16080{tilde}richasi/Cirque/)).

The site was created five years ago by Ricky Russo (a.k.a. Richasi), a die-hard Cirque fan from Orlando, Fla. He formed the fan club two years later, by combining various on-line list groups and chat sites. The group now publishes a monthly newsletter and has 585 members.

Isabelle Panelli, the Cirque du Soleil publicist for *Quidam*, says she was more than a little surprised when she heard the Cirqueis were coming to town.

"Completely," she exclaims, her eyes still wide in disbelief. "We didn't even know they existed, but we were eager to meet them. They're so organized."

Panelli says she's a bit "overwhelmed" as she takes the group on a backstage tour on Saturday afternoon.

"Are there any questions I can answer?" she asks, as the group follows her through the Grand Chapiteau and into the rehearsal room where two young gymnasts from China are practising on the parallel bars.

"I know most of you are actually quite knowledgeable about Cirque du Soleil. You probably know more than me," she jokes.

"What is this one's name?" asks Gary Chapman, referring to Cirque's distinctive yellow-and-blue-swirled Grand Chapiteau. Every tent apparently has its own name.

"That's a good question," says Panelli. She can tell them it took seven days to erect, but she doesn't know the name of this particular tent.

Chapman nods smugly, as if to say he didn't think she'd know. He is here with his wife, Jill, to meet their on-line friends and see *Quidam* for the first time. They will actually be seeing the show twice.

They have tickets for both Saturday's matinee and evening performances.

"Each show is different," explains Chapman, who will have seen 53 Cirque shows by the end of the night.

"Which means you might get to see all the acts if you go twice," adds Jill Chapman, the fan in this group who can boast of seeing the most performances -- 55 in total.

The Chapmans say they fell in love with each other before they fell in love with Cirque, but having this shared obsession only enhances the relationship.

What is about Cirque that makes them all gooey-eyed?

"Everything," Jill declares enthusiastically. "The music, the costumes, the acts, the story, the performers and how it all comes together."

"The ambiance," adds Gary.

"Yes, the ambiance," Jill nods in agreement.

After the evening's performance, the group waits as the rest of the audience exits the tent. They have been granted a special question-and-answer session with the Cirque artists.

Laura Wood, a college student from Olympia, Wash., here with her mom, is ecstatic.

"It's like going backstage to see the Rolling Stones. That's how cool this is to me," she exclaims.

Wood has only seen four Cirque shows in her life, but she visits the Fascination Yahoo! chat group about twice a week.

"If I had more money, I'd go see them all. It's an expensive habit," explains Wood, who paid \$102 (Canadian) for her ticket, plus gas and lodging at a local bed and breakfast.

Being a Cirque fan is not a mainstream pursuit, adds Wood. "In America, it's not as popular as it is here. Most people, when you tell them you're a Cirque fan, they say. . . ."

"Cirque wha?" Keith Johnson interjects, laughing knowingly.

Johnson is one of the main writers for the newsletter. He's here with his wife, her father, sister and cousin. He'd love to talk more about the group, but first he has to go get one of the clown's autographs.

"Sorry, it's been like this all day," he apologizes, as he races off.

Shane Courtwright, one of the lead acrobats in *Quidam*, who hails from B.C., says he doesn't think these Cirque acts are at all weird.

"No, I think it's great. I'm looking to be inspired. I wish I had a web page so I could give them more."

Johnson returns as the publicist sadly announces the end of the night, and starts herding the group out of

the tent.

"It's hard to say what we all share in common," says Johnson. "Cirque is the kind of product that doesn't appeal to everyone. But there are certain people whom it touches on a certain level."

Personally, Johnson thinks seeing the same Cirque show four times in one weekend, as some members of this group are doing, is a bit over the top. But he's proud to be wearing his Cirque jean jacket, which he says helps spread the word.

"Whenever I wear it, people stop and talk to me. It gives me the opportunity to evangelize, if you will."

Johnson expects that the fans of Cirque will continue to grow with the company. "The greatest challenge for the company will be convincing people that each show is a different experience. My parents in San Diego don't understand. They say 'We've already seen Cirque du Soleil,' " but they've only seen *Dralion*."

He also accepts that there are some people who will simply never understand his Cirque obsession, "in the same way that someone who has never seen *Star Trek* doesn't understand why some people dress up in Vulcan ears and go to conventions all over the world. It's an individual thing."

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