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**CIRQUE DIEHARD DEVOTEES**

**Fans view shows, meet artists, bond**

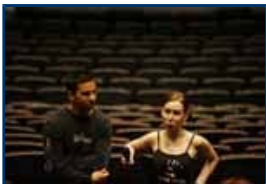
By **SONYA PADGETT**  
REVIEW-JOURNAL



"KA" performers rehearse a scene from the show for attendees of CirqueCon 2006. Photos by Issac Brekken/Review-Journal.



CirqueCon 2006 attendees listen as "KA" performers and crew members answer questions from the private audience in the KA theater at the MGM Grand. More than 200 Cirque du Soleil fans attended the convention last week and saw performances of all five Cirque shows on the Strip.



Cirque du Soleil performers Matt Salcedo

Six days after a heart attack, Rusty Marti, 52, jumped on an airplane to Las Vegas.

Her doctor didn't know. She didn't dare ask, as he may have prevented the Sun Valley, Idaho, native from experiencing what she called the opportunity of a lifetime: a convention of Cirque du Soleil fans. The fact that it was in Las Vegas, a place she always wanted to visit, was a bonus.

"A couple years ago, I made a list of things I wanted to do before I died," Marti said. "See Cirque and visit Las Vegas are on the list. This way, I got two for the price of one."

But what about her health?

"I feel great, actually. Better than I thought I would," Marti said as she stood outside the KA theater in the MGM Grand waiting for her group to be let in.

More than 200 diehard Cirque fans from around the world came to Las Vegas last weekend to attend the third annual

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and Erica Linz answer questions from CirqueCon 2006 attendees at the KA theater at the MGM Grand.

CirqueCon convention. Attendees saw all five Cirque shows, met Cirque performers, grilled stage managers, peered behind the scenes and reveled in all things Cirque.

"There are people who collect stamps, follow rock groups," said convention organizer Keith Johnson. "We follow Cirque."

The first convention was in 2004 in Vancouver when Johnson and his wife, LouAnna Valentine, got a group of friends together to see "Quidam" in Vancouver. Eventually, the group grew to more than 30 people, thanks to Internet chatrooms devoted to the company. Cirque du Soleil caught wind of the group's plans, took them on a tour of "Quidam" and gave them access to performers. A staff member suggested the group travel to Montreal to see another show and CirqueCon was born.

Though the level of devotion among convention attendees varies, these fans claim to have been touched or moved or captivated by a Cirque performance in a way that changed their lives.

Take Kristi Piet, 20, for instance. When she saw "O" four years ago, she was hooked.

"My father brought me to Las Vegas for my sweet 16," said Piet, who did some graphics for the convention. "I had no idea what Cirque was, but I was captivated by the music."

So captivated by Cirque, in fact, that Piet hopes to one day work for the company in the physio-therapy department. Currently a massage student, she plans to get a degree in athletic training. And Piet has been in touch with Cirque about doing an internship in the therapy department.

Rafael Serrano traveled with his wife from Tijuana, Mexico, to attend the convention. The couple saw the touring show "Varekai" in San Diego in 2005.

"That's when it became a passion for us," Serrano said.

They've seen 11 of the 12 shows. The couple's true devotion is demonstrated in the way they watch the shows. They sit apart.

"I sit up front where I can see the emotion on the face, the muscles trembling, the sweat. My wife likes to sit back to see the overall show," Serrano said. "We've been to cities we never would have thought of going because of Cirque."

Johnson and Valentine might be the truest devotees of all. When they married four years ago, their wedding was as close to a Cirque show as they could get, without actually calling in the professionals.

Bride, groom and wedding party members all dressed as various Cirque or Cirque-inspired characters. The wedding had a plot, about a headless man becoming whole by joining with his true love. And the cake was an elaborate Cirque-themed big top tent.

"When you come into a Cirque show and see the sights before you, it transports you to a whole other world," Johnson explained.