



Artisans de L'Imaginaire

30 ans du Cirque du Soleil



"Cirque in Transition"

PART FOUR: 1999 - 2004





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Can Cirque du Soleil go on without Dragone? "There's no reason why the circus can't change with the times." - Guy Caron

At the end of 1998, the creative team behind so many of Cirque du Soleil's productions in the 1990s - Franco Dragone, Michel Crete and Dominique Lemieux - concluded their remarkable run of artistic and professional development with the company, leaving the creative reins to future shows in the hands of others and giving Cirque du Soleil an interesting dilemma to overcome during the first-half of the new millennium: how to move on from a very successful run of productions under the helm of Franco Dragone and his team of conceptors and show the world it could still re-invent the circus.

Faced with the challenge of mounting a new show, with a new team, in a compressed period of time, Guy Laliberté turned to an old friend: Guy Caron. Since he had left Cirque in 1988, Caron had maintained friendly relations with Laliberté. In 1992, he had even directed a show called "Cirque Knie Presents Cirque du Soleil" for the Swiss National Circus, produced in collaboration with Cirque. Caron's job wasn't easy, though. He'd have to pick up the creative pieces and attempt to meet or exceed the expectations laid down by the likes of Quidam, "O" and La Nouba.

Despite the challenges - or perhaps because of them - Laliberté and Caron were able to show that it was the creative juices of the whole rather than just one man that drove the company, and it was during this period of transition that Cirque du Soleil began to branch out beyond theatrical productions; Cirque would dive into the realm of motion pictures and television full-force with Journey of Man (IMAX film), Fire Within (reality series) and Solstrom (variety series). The company would also double-down on its presence in Las Vegas with back-to-back productions: Zumanity, a new take on Cabaret, billed as "another side of Cirque du Soleil"; and with KÀ, a motion picture come to life.

This era, with the launch of new touring shows Varekai (in 2002) and Corteo (in 2005), helped prove without a doubt that Cirque du Soleil could and would continue without Franco Dragone. But it wasn't easy... Audiences on three continents continue to marvel at Cirque du Soleil's four resident shows (La Nouba, Mystère, "O" and Alegría, which found a permanent home at Beau Rivage, a new Mirage resort in Biloxi, Mississippi.) and three touring productions (Saltimbanco, Quidam and Dralion); in the year alone, close to 6 million spectators will attend Cirque du Soleil shows worldwide. By October, Alegría leaves its home at the Beau Rivage and prepares to embark on an Asia/Pacific tour beginning in Australia. Dralion continues to make its way across North America and provides yet another backdrop for a special TV Production, which earns Cirque du Soleil three Primetime Emmy Awards the following year.

Cirque's performances continue to be a unique balance of physical strength, art and beauty, deeply ingrained with audacity. With Gilles' historic stilt walkathon from Baie-Saint-Paul to Quebec City, Guy Caron's artistic instincts, and Guy Laliberté's go-for-broke gambling spirit, it's been there from the beginning. It's stitched into the very fabric of the Grand Chapiteau. But Cirque also begins looking beyond live entertainment for new means to share their which wonder, joy and creativity. After a grand premiere in Berlin in January 2000, the Cirque launches its first-ever large-format IMAX production in North America by May: Cirque du Soleil - Journey of Man ("Passages" in French). Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, after a grand premiere in the film will opens in Montreal, New York and Los Angeles before moving on to other markets.



Although through Dralion Cirque du Soleil seems to retain its creative juices, it would soon lose what some have considered the heart of the company. On April 24, 2000, Daniel Gauthier announced he was giving up the presidency of Cirque du Soleil by the end of the year - a position he held since 1990. "My decision to put an end to our business partnership comes after a great deal of reflection and lengthy discussions with my partner," said Daniel Gauthier. "My choice was made on strictly personal grounds, and I wish these reasons to remain private."

The expertise that he developed has earned him a great deal of public recognition during his years as President of Cirque du Soleil. In 1999, the Faculty of Management of McGill University gave him the McGill Management Achievement Award. In addition, the magazine Commerce named him a "Bâtitseur du siècle" (builder of the century). In 1998, he was inducted into the ranks of "Great Montrealers," one of the most prestigious honors awarded by the City of Montreal and the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal.

Guy Laliberté had this to say about the announcement: "I respect Daniel's decision and I thank him for all these years of stimulating partnership; his unflagging commitment to the development of Cirque, his passion, his unbridled devotion and the fact that we shared a common vision greatly helped to make the Cirque du Soleil brand known on four continents. With the help of Daniel and the organization's senior managers, I will provide the leadership for this transition and do my utmost to ensure that it is harmonious and efficient, just as our collaboration has always been."

This announcement comes at a time when the organization had achieved maturity and stability in all respects. Guy Laliberté added, "Cirque du Soleil has always been very adaptable. We are developing a transition plan. I am remaining at the helm of Cirque du Soleil in order to ensure that we do not lose sight of the mission and values of the company that I founded in 1984. The vision I had at the outset remains the same, and our projects under development will always continue to push back the limits of the possible. Our dream goes on." But it was quite a shock and if there was any doubt that Cirque du Soleil was in transition, losing Daniel Gauthier removed that doubt. His stepping down wouldn't be the only organization change to come that year, however. On December 11, 2000, Laliberté announces the appointment of Mr. Daniel Lamarre to the position of President of the New Ventures business unit of Cirque du Soleil effective January 15, 2001. Lamarre, as you might recall, worked for a rather large public relations firm in Quebec in 1986 and represented Cirque du Soleil for free, knowing the company couldn't afford his fee.

Mr. Laliberté said, "Daniel's appointment is a reflection of my desire to expand Cirque du Soleil's international business activities. For the past 16 years, we have successfully created, produced and operated live shows. I believe that we are ready to take on new challenges by expanding our creative platform to non-live show areas. Daniel's solid track record as a leader will assist me in achieving our ambitious goals."

"Today, with this new challenge, I am fulfilling a dream," declared Mr. Lamarre. "I have always wanted to apply my skills at an international level. With Guy and the management team at Cirque du Soleil, I have the opportunity to bring Cirque's brand of creativity into new and exciting areas."

The New Ventures business unit will be responsible for leading the company efforts in activities other than live shows. Its mandate will focus on five areas of development: Cirque du Soleil Entertainment Complexes; Audiovisual and Multimedia (Cirque du Soleil Images); Hotel, Spa, Food and Beverage; Retail and Licensing; and New Entertainment.

Before joining Laliberté's team in January 2001, he served as president and CEO of TVA Group, Quebec's largest private television broadcaster, for nearly four years. In addition to his day-to-day management duties, he was also responsible for strategic planning and business development. While holding a seat on the TVA Group board of directors, he also served as an administrator for McDonald's Restaurants of Canada, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, and the Montreal Heart Institute Research Fund. From 1984 to 1997, Daniel Lamarre worked with National Public Relations, the largest private public relations firm in Canada, first as executive vice-president and senior partner, then as president starting in 1995. He became president and CEO of Burson-Marsteller in 1981, and opened a first Montreal branch for this, the world's largest PR firm. In 1977, he served as public relations director for the cable operator Cogeco. Before that, he was communications director for the Fédération des Caisses Populaires du Centre du Québec.

Before taking up his management duties in the world of communications, Daniel Lamarre worked as a journalist for over 10 years. Little did he realize, or we as fans would know, how far he would go within the company.

Guy Laliberté declares 2001 the beginning of "Cirque du Soleil, Volume 2" but his company already began the transition years before.

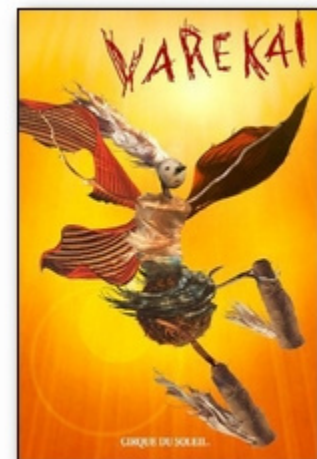


The style that Franco Dragone championed – an approach that promoted spontaneity over rigidity – goes by the wayside. New shows begat new directors and creative teams, no one show from this moment on is created by the same group of people. And those who come into the Director's fold already have a plan: each show is now scripted from beginning to end, fostering a loss of that special *je ne sais quoi* in the process. Now it seemed as if Cirque du Soleil was an entertainment company rather than an artistic one. Perhaps a better comparison would be a symphony, with its resident conductor providing a base and guest conductors taking the orchestra and audience off in new directions.

Cirque du Soleil keeps on growing with the inauguration of a 14,000-square-metre addition to its International Headquarters in Montreal. In addition, *Alegría* kicks off a three-year tour of the immense Asia-Pacific region in Auckland, New Zealand. Six other shows continue to dazzle audiences across the world: *Saltimbanco* in Japan, *Mystère* in Las Vegas, «O» in Las Vegas, *La Nouba* at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, *Quidam* in Europe, and *Dralion* in the United States.

On October 30th, Cirque du Soleil released its entire show catalogue onto DVD: *La Magie Continue*, *Le Cirque Réinventé*, *Nouvelle Expérience*, and *Saltimbanco* as well as *Journey of Man* and *Baroque Odyssey* (the 10th Anniversary documentary). A few days later, "Cirque du Soleil presents: *Alegría*", a special 90-minute television production of its signature show, premieres on TV. And, by year's end, 6 million people or more will have attended a Cirque show worldwide.

Cirque du Soleil wows its largest audience ever when it presents a one-of-a-kind performance at the 74th Annual Academy Awards held on March 24, 2002 at Grumman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, California. The reaction is electrifying, breaking records at Cirque du Soleil's website and catapulting the company to new heights. A month later, *Varekai*, directed by first-time Cirque director Dominic Champagne in collaboration with twelve other talented creators, began its journey, joining *Dralion* across North America. During the creation process, a film crew shot a reality-TV series about some of the show's performers and their struggles during its development. The series - *Fire Within* - would air the following year. And in June, *Alegría* returned to North American soil for a two-year long run in select cities across Canada, the United States and, for the first time in history, in Latin America - Mexico. *Alegría* is later joined by *Quidam*, while *Saltimbanco* continued playing to audiences throughout Europe.



And by year's end, an announcement of yet another resident show for Las Vegas had many fans' appetite whet for something a little more risqué - Zumanity, another side of Cirque du Soleil.

After touring select cities across the United States and Canada, Quidam once again bids adieu to North America and embarked on a year-long tour of Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, visiting Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka throughout 2003. Alegría continued its second North American Tour, joining Varekai and Dralion. In cooperation with Cirque du Soleil Images, the television documentary series "Fire Within" airs in the United States; an intimate and revealing behind-the-scenes look at the effort and struggles during the creation of Varekai. The series wins an Emmy award plus two Gemini awards. The show itself was filmed late in its run in Toronto and released to home markets in autumn.



While Quidam tours Japan throughout the year, by summer (July) the adults-only show ZUMANITY premieres at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. Created by Dominic Chapagne and René Richard Cyr, it's the first Cirque du Soleil production for adults only. Zumanity joins Mystère and «O» on the Las Vegas Strip. And, by year's end, Cirque du Soleil films its first ever production for Television called

"Solstrom". "Solstrom", a 13-part family-oriented television variety series that merges acrobatic acts with dramatic comedy, features over 250 artists in over 130 acts from many of Cirque du Soleil shows and includes a number of celebrity guest performances.

In 2004, Cirque du Soleil celebrates its 20th anniversary in the streets of their hometown with the people of Montreal through a spectacular live musical event. A recording of this event is later broadcast under the name "Midnight Sun" (Soleil de Minuit) and released onto DVD. During the festivities Cirque du Soleil set a new record for the Guinness Book of World Records gathering 544 employees at Headquarters to stilt walk. In business, Cirque du Soleil Musique is launched in September. It is a record company dedicated to the creation, production, and marketing of the music associated with current and future Cirque du Soleil shows, and to the career development of emerging artists from around the world. On tour, Dralion leaves North America bound for Europe, where it will complete an extensive multi-year tour. Alegría continued its North American Tour, but by year's end, the show is bound for Tokyo and the rest of Japan. Quidam, which would end its Japanese Tour in the early months of the year, returned to Canada for a two-city run before embarking on a year-long tour throughout Australia/New Zealand. And, in November, the biggest most epic show in Cirque du Soleil history is born. Directed by Robert LePage, KÀ is launched at the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Celebrity Cruises unveils a unique concept of on-board entertainment developed by Cirque du Soleil on two of its cruise ships in 2005. This concept, called "the Bar at the Edge of the Earth" featured unique dining fare with a Cirque du Soleil flair. The first touring show in three years is launched in Montreal. Directed by Daniele Finzi Pasca, the Italian-born director takes Cirque du Soleil through the funeral of a clown in *Corteo*. Cirque du Soleil Images films *Corteo* during its Toronto stop-over, later premiering on CBC/BRAVO and released onto DVD.



* * *

In this section we will cover – from inception to conception – *Dralion, Journey of Man, Varekai, Fire Within, Zumanity, Solstrom, and KA*.

All seemed well, but a tumultuous time was afoot.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL®



DRALION™

"A fusion of ancient Chinese circus tradition with the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil"

DRALION

Dralion (pronounced *Drah-lee-on*) is billed as an unprecedented fusion of ancient Chinese acrobatic traditions and the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil, a contemporary collage of the original and the eclectic – the primitive and the post-modern, and as a celebration of life, deriving much of its inspiration from Eastern philosophies with its principles of perpetual discovery and harmony between nature and man.

The show's name is drawn from its two main symbols — the dragon, representing the East, and the lion, representing the West - and pays homage to the four elements that maintain the natural order of things: air, water, fire and earth. Dralion propels these four pillars of the universe, which take on human form and rule worlds defined by their individual vivid colors, into a futuristic dimension - a timeless and allegorical place, ruled by magical laws.

Suspended in time between the past and the future, here, the iridescent colors of the costumes are reflected in the metallic glints of a decor straight out of the *cinéma fantastique*.

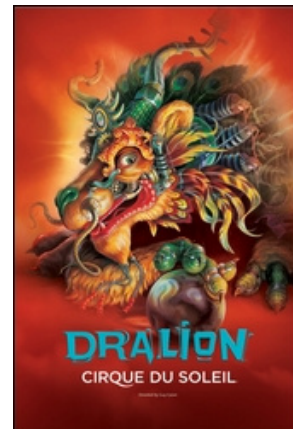
The musical score simultaneously borrows from traditional sources while entering an electro-symphonic realm of a world yet to come. Innovation soars to new heights as it defies the laws of nature. Dralion, they say, is Cirque du Soleil at its purest, a dynamic performance that seems to transcend the boundaries of the imagination and lead us into a dreamscape with a new and sparkling perspective. But is it?

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	April 22, 1999 (Big Top) October 20, 2010 (Arena)
Type:	Touring / BigTop & Arena
Director:	Guy Carron
Composer:	Violaine Corradi
Finale:	December 31, 2009 (Big Top) Currently Touring (Arena)

Creative Team

Guide	Composer
Guy Laliberté	Violaine Corradi
Director	Lighting Designer
Guy Caron	Luc Lafortune
Creation	Sound Designer
Gilles Ste-Croix	Guy Desrochers
Choreographer	Costume Designer
Julie Lachance	François Barbeau
Set Designer	Acrobatic Acts
Stéphane Roy	Li Xining



/// A CREATIVE DEPARTURE

"This is the third new production from Cirque du Soleil in only six months, following hard on the heels of "O", which opened in October 1998, and La Nouba, which premiered in December 1998. Dralion marks a turning point in Cirque du Soleil's history: it is the first show by a new creative team headed by Gilles Ste-Croix" - Cirque Press Release.

Citing the need to take a break (after developing Saltimbanco, Mystère, Alegría, Quidam, "O" and La Nouba back-to-back-to-back-to-back), by the end of 1998, the creative team behind so many of Cirque du Soleil's productions in the 1990s – François Bergeron, Debra Brown, Michel Crête, Jonathan Deans, Dominique Lemieux, Benoit Jutras and Franco Dragone - concluded their remarkable run of artistic and professional development with the company, and decided to leave the creative reins of future shows in the hands of others. And so a new development team took up the challenge to combine Cirque du Soleil's style with the Chinese circus tradition on a large scale. "With Dralion, it's as if we were closing a circle. Saltimbanco still contained a lot of traditional circus elements, but from Mystère onward, our shows became increasingly theatrical. Now, Dralion brings it full circle: we're back to the circus again," said Gilles Ste-Croix in an interview for Cirque du Soleil's website (Spectaculara).

The development of what became Dralion was difficult from the very beginning. Several months into preproduction, the French director slated for the project - Philippe Decoufflé - abandoned ship. Sylvie Galarneau, who would become artistic director of the show remembered, "He freaked out. He said the project was too big and he couldn't be comfortable working in that environment." Confronted with the challenge of mounting a new show, with a new team, in a compressed period of time, Guy Laliberté turned to an old friend: Guy Caron. Caron had maintained friendly relations with Laliberté since he had left Cirque in 1988, even directing "Cirque Knie Presents Cirque du Soleil" for the Swiss National Circus (in 1992), produced in collaboration with Cirque, so his credentials were solid. Even so, Caron's job on Dralion wasn't easy. He'd have to pick up the pieces left by Decoufflé's departure and mold them into a show to meet or exceed the expectations laid down by the likes of Quidam, "O" and La Nouba.

Faced with a tight deadline and a public wondering when Cirque would debut another touring show (by this time 1996's Quidam was the last touring show the company premiered, even though the company was hard at work creating "O" at the Bellagio and La Nouba at Walt Disney World in 1998) Guy Caron called on the talents of François Barbeau (Costume Designer), Stéphane Roy (Set Designer), Violaine Corradi (Composer), Julie Lachance (Choreographer), Guy Desrochers (Sound Designer), Michel Beaulieu (Lighting Designer), and Michel Dallaire (Clown Act Designer) to help bring his vision to fruition.

"Guy (Laliberté) and Daniel (Gauthier) had [worked] with Chinese acrobats [in the past]," said Galarneau. "And they had a dream of a [bigger] troupe coming from China to perform with the Cirque." But that dream was trickier to realize than one might think, Galarneau added. While the Chinese government had adopted a more open policy toward the rest of the world, it was still difficult to get Chinese citizens out of China unless they were involved in a government-sponsored project. A small number of acrobats was no problem, "but 35 was a 'big problem'," said Galarneau.

But the Cirque, in part because of contacts the owners had made with Chinese troupes in the past, was able to finally get the artists it needed – by contracting with an already existing circus troupe – Flag Circus of China.

"The result of our trips to China was a meeting, a hybrid, of Soleil's signature style and some major Chinese content," Galarneau explains. "But it is not strictly a Chinese show." Like other productions currently in the prosperous Montreal-based troupe's empire, "Dralion" is gauzily wrapped in a cosmic theme. "The main images here are of the four major elements — earth, air, fire, water," says Galarneau. "And we've added a fifth, a Chinese element we call 'strength of soul.' Our director wanted to show all these little unending circles of life, which all need to join together in balance to survive."

Blending Eastern and Western sounds to create rhythmic and lyrical motifs, the electric and acoustic Dralion score draws its inspiration from classic Indian melodies, weaving in influences from Andalusia, Africa as well as Central and Western Europe. The band is composed of six musicians and two singers who perform live for every performance. "With Dralion, we were trying to find a place where all the musical traditions of the world meet, in such a way that something altogether new comes out of it," says Violaine Corradi, Composer. "There's a lot of music in there: Andalusian, Arabic, ragga, African, and more. It sounds like all of that, and none of it." Guy Desrochers, Sound Designer, adds: "The music in Dralion has a lot of Middle-Eastern elements and percussion in it. That dictated how we designed the sound for the whole show. As soon as you walk into the big top, you're in that atmosphere, in that environment."

Guided by the desire to pay homage to the structure of the human body, Stéphane Roy set himself a challenge on creating the show's set and stage: to devise a concept in which each set element was an essential part of a whole. *"In this show, we were very preoccupied with the mechanical invading the organic and soulful. The set itself is a kind of giant insect, a biomechanical construct in which all the characters in the show live. The idea is to set up a tension between the two: how do you resolve it? Cirque depends a great deal on the mechanical to perform successfully. But here, it's very much as Da Vinci presented machines in his drawings: the machine as an extension of the human, always. You can't remove the soul from the machine."*

From start to finish, it took six months of intensive conceptual work, four months of construction and two months of fine-tuning to produce an immense technological structure that also doubles as an acrobatic prop. Given the structure's uniqueness and complexity, setting it up under the Big Top takes approximately 50 specialized technicians about 50 hours to complete.

- **THE STAGE** -- The floor is over 12.7 m (41.67 feet) in diameter. It is covered with Taraflex, a surface material designed to absorb shock and which is a key factor in preventing artist injuries. Shapes painted onto the floor are meant to echo the technical rings located over the stage. Strategically positioned around the stage are about 10 trap doors used both for artistic purposes—performers can use them to appear or disappear—and for technical purposes, during acts such as the double trapeze.

- **THE SUN AND ITS COMPONENTS** -- Three aluminum rings, each performing its own unique function, hang a little over 13 m (42.65 feet) above the stage. The first is simply called the grid. It supports the technical ring while serving as a catwalk for performers waiting to make their entrance and as a work area for riggers. At just over 11 m (36 feet) in diameter, the second and largest ring is referred to as the technical ring. It is used to hang various projectors and hold up an enormous lantern. The third and final ring, dubbed "the Sun", is the acrobatic element of the set. Measuring 6.5 m (21.32 feet) in diameter, it can be moved up and down, rotated, and placed at different angles. The entire rig weighs about nine tons.
- **THE METALLIC WALL AND ITS CLAWS** -- At 8 m (26.25 feet) high and 18 m (59 feet) wide, the metallic wall resembles an immense coat of mail. The wall is semi-transparent and covered with perforated aluminum. Serving as both an orchestra pit and the wings of the stage, the wall supports technical elements (the claws), technicians and artists, whether they are suspended, attached to or climbing the wall. Made of steel and aluminum, the claws are a little over 5 m (16.4 feet) long and are attached to the wall 7 m (23 feet) above the stage. Together this griffe wall weighs 18 tons.

And working closely with the Director and drawing his inspiration from the mythical fantasy world of Dralion, François Barbeau set out to create costumes that reflect the distinctive features of the four elements and the families of associated charters. *"One of the things we want to do with Dralion is to have people rediscover the power and importance of the four elements," says Barbeau. "We take them for granted in our daily lives. Values have been displaced. Maybe one of the goals of Dralion is to help re-establish a connection with the elements."*

"Basically, the costumes are simple, and the accent is very much on color," says Barbeau, who won an Emmy for his "Dralion" designs. "The colors are very, very powerful — there are no pastels. When we deal with the element of water it is all green, because looking down at China from the airplane I saw many green lakes below, like pieces of jade. "Fire is red, of course. The earth is represented with browns and ochre and reddish browns, and the air is blue. It's very basic, but quite sophisticated." One challenge for Barbeau was making the shimmering, "sculptural" costumes durable enough to hold up well on tour: "The fabric is dyed in spectacular ways, but each piece is designed to last," he states. He adds that typically a performer will wear five different costumes in the show, and must make presto offstage changes so the visual spell is never broken for audiences.

Other interesting notes about the costumes are...

- Over 5,000 meters of fabric were used. The fabrics come from regions around the globe, including China, the United States, Italy, France, England and Quebec.
- Natural and synthetic fabrics such as silk, lycra, velvet, leather and cotton blend together harmoniously. Marrying a wide variety of fabrics helps ensure that the artists' specific costume needs can be met.
- The artisans of Cirque du Soleil's costume workshop worked for over three months making all the costumes, hats, wigs and footwear required. In all there are approximately 1,250 costume pieces in the show (and another 1,000 kept as back-ups).

- Materials that might be considered somewhat unusual were used in accessories and to add finishing touches to costumes: horse hair, raffia, metal, window screen, emu feathers, crystal, styrofoam, plastic, fun fur, springs and even hardware! As an example: to create the texture on the chest plate on the singer's Costume, bugs were glued on and then molded into different shapes. There are a total of 2,880 gold pick used on the singers' gold sleeves in one year.

But while the new team was settling in nicely, and music, set and stage, and costumes were coming together, other problems ensued. "The biggest challenge in Dralion was getting the Chinese artists to move in the Cirque way," Julie Lachance remembered. Laliberte, Caron and group were not able to work in the intuitive, work-shop style championed by Dragone and the company – as the Chinese were not able to easily adapt to the free-form methods. So rather than attempt a Dragone-style show, Caron revisited the earlier style of Le Cirque Réinventé, preferring a show that's "full of energy, without gaps [and] full of strong acts. We said, 'Okay, we'll forget all about the characters and some of the other things that Franco did,'" recalled Caron in *Cirque du Soleil 20 Years Under the Sun* book. "Instead, I opted to explore the root of the circus, and to adhere to a very high technical standard. I also wanted to make the funniest show we could."

Despite the challenges - or perhaps because of them - Laliberté and Caron fulfilled their life-long dream of working with the Chinese on a large-scale project in Dralion, which, despite its challenges and mis-placed hatred for it (many within Cirque at the time did not like the show either), has received enthusiastic public response over its lifetime, going on to become one of the highest grossing touring shows in the company's stable.

/// L'ÂME-FORCE

"Take an extraordinary journey through a futuristic dimension, where you can soar to new heights, and defy the laws of nature." - Dralion Press Release.

As we learned, Dralion is billed as a contemporary collage of the original and the eclectic, the primitive and the post-modern, but at its heart it's a fusion of ancient Chinese acrobatic traditions with the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil on a large scale. Cirque is certainly no stranger to Chinese circus arts, employing acts from the Orient in many of their shows (Water Meteors in *La Magie Continue* and Foot Juggling in *Nouvelle Experience* immediately come to mind), but what would they be capable of doing with a full-fledged Chinese circus? Guy Caron was determined to find out, taking much of his show's inspiration from Eastern philosophy with its principles of perpetual discovery and harmony between man and nature. "For me, the wall is where it all begins in Dralion," said Guy Caron regarding the show. "Life comes through it, in the form of the four elements. That's why, at the end, the artists come back to the wall. Dralion was created at the cusp of a new millennium, and I wanted to express what the future could mean for me. And, for me, the future means children. It also means women. The future belongs to them."

As earlier stated, the show takes its name from its two main symbols: the dragon, representing the Orient, and the lion, representing the Occident. In reality, Cirque's Dralion is actually closer to the rare Chinese gilin. A qilin is a mythical beast with a dragon head and a horse or lion body. Its Japanese incarnation, the Kirin, is more recognizable in the West due to the famous beer bearing the same name. However, the Dralion dance is based on northern Chinese lion dance. With a costume design unique to Cirque, the Dralion is a new incarnation that fuses many elements that pays homage to the natural order of things. Air, water, fire and earth assume human form and evolve into worlds defined by their own vivid colors:

- Azala is the Element of Air. She is the keeper of the sun and the guardian of immortality, watching over the heavens to protect all those who take to the skies. Azala is identified by the color of the skies -- Blue.
- Oceane is the Element of Water. With her exotic dance, she has the power to control all the waters of the world. You can identify Oceane by the color of the waters -- Aqua Green.
- Gaya is the Element of Earth. She is warm, comforting and rhythmic. Her tribal dance echoes the pulse of human life. Gaya is identified by the soils of Earth -- Brown.
- Yao is the element of Fire. He is a warrior and a shaman; the fiery demon's guide. Yao can be identified by the color of flame -- Red.

Dralion propels these four pillars of the universe into a futuristic dimension - a timeless and allegorical place suspended between the past and the future, ruled by magical laws where fantastical feats of strength and agility commence:

PROLOGUE

A young Chinese boy (Little Buddha - the chosen child) with just a tuft of hair on his head pushes through a strong cloak of fog, carrying an hourglass filled with the sands of creation. As a tribal beat begins to fill the air so does a sense of urgency. A sense that a new dimension is about to reveal itself to you. As he looks out amongst the visitors to his realm, he flips the hourglass on end, threading the sands of time and space into motion – backwards, forwards; suspended – and calling forth the four elements of the Earth.

One by one they fill the stage: Gaya is first, in Ochre, dancing jubilantly about representing the Goddess of the Earth. Next, Azala, in blue, floats in from above on sheets of silk. She is the guardian of the sun and immortality and represents the element Air. Thirdly, Oceane, in green, is representing the element of water. Last, Yao, in red, thunders his way from below. He brings all the good and evil represented in the element of Fire. The four elements come together and began a rhythmic dance; a dance of compliments. But then - a flash; a spark; a fire - and the world of Dralion is illuminated for all those who come to bear witness. And one by one the elements part and return to their natural motions... but they will return.

HAND BALANCING

Oceane presents herself to us in the form of a single, fragile girl. She will take her position atop a single metal cane and perform some of the most spellbinding acts of strength and balance seen. Staying in positions that would make even the strongest man collapse in agony, she is able to twist around and support herself with only her arms. And just when you think there's nothing else she could show you, she straightens herself up on one hand... allowing a leg to drift... then bounces to her other hand - without touching the ground.

BAMBOO POLES

Yao (fire) next introduces the Bamboo Pole act. Six men are in control of their destinies as they maneuver 15 3/4 feet long poles in the air that weigh almost 16 pounds. Their precise movements allow them to balance the poles on the palms of their hands without any other support. And, in synchronous action, they toss the poles into the air, leaving themselves just enough time to perform a summersault and catch them again before they hit the ground. The bamboo performers also bang their poles on the stage in time with the music embellishing this ancient Chinese ritual. Yao also dances with an imposingly sharp teeth-chattering weapon to conclude the act.

JUGGLING

Lead by Gaya, the goddess of the Earth, a spidery creature slithers on stage giving birth to an ominous man. Choreographed with precision, this juggler is flexible, talented, and commands presence. Trying to explain what he does in words is too hard a task. From dance, to gymnastics, to just craziness, the juggler (originally Viktor Kee) is a complete master of his art. And in the conclusion of his mind-boggling performance he tosses all his balls in the air, keeping only one – a red one (his heart) – which he gives to Azala suspended in the air.

TEETERBOARD

Oceane presents her second performance, a boggling act of strength. Usually performed by men only, for Dralion Cirque has employed all women. Watch with amazement as two artists use a teeterboard to propel a third into the air... unsure whether she will complete her twist and somersault before landing – split-legged - on the shoulders of her teammates. Rising from a one, two, three, four and even five person tower, these elements from the ocean astound all as a flip lands one of these lovely girls into a chair atop the shoulders of her teammates!

DOUBLE TRAPEZE

Performing on two identical instruments, the fliers will astound you with their quick jumps, flips and acrobatics. But nothing compares to the quick hand to feet to hand flips in mid air that are performed here. The act comes to a spectacular close when the artists release a stream of color from their grasps and a circular wall of greens and blues covers the stage. The intermission has begun.

BALLET ON LIGHTS

Upon return, a stage-covering lantern that houses ghostly floating images treats the eyes. When the shade lifts, a troupe of girls are revealed standing on an illuminated platform. Presented for the first time outside of China, seven young women, in pointed ballet shoes, perform a ballet on specially designed light bulbs. (Don't worry... the bulbs can hold a static weight of 700 pounds; special shoes are used to walk on them.)

DRALIONS

A blend of the traditional Chinese dragon and lion dances, Dralions, as reworked by Cirque du Soleil, takes on new scope here. In a dynamic and energetic tumbling sequence, the artists come on stage on wooden balls which they roll under their feet and on which they perform somersaults. Five Dralions perform acrobatics around them. The signature of the performance is when the five Dralions climb on one single wooden ball and, by working together, must get the ball from one end of a teeterboard to the next.

SPIRITS & PAS-DE-DEUX

As a prelude to Pas de deux, four young women perform an aerial ballet. Suspended from the set's giant claws by special harnesses, they twirl and float over the heads of their partners. Pas de deux is a languorous aerial dance. A couple, intertwined, flies over the stage in a long band of blue cloth (60 feet long). Within the cloth, they perform various acrobatic figures that demand great feats of strength and flexibility.

HOOP DIVING

Derived from Chinese acrobatic tradition, the hoop diving act takes on a tribal flavor from the African-influenced music to which it is performed. Ten male artists dive and throw themselves like arrows through 18 wooden hoops. The hoops are fastened to a table; some remain stationary while others rotate.

SKIPPING ROPES

"Kamandé" hits the ground for this playful and final act. A creation by Li Xi Ning, this performance takes the children's game of jump roping to a "new level of acrobatic prowess". Yellow and red fitted acrobats fill the stage holding a long, red, rope. As it beats to the music, the acrobats flip, fly and defy the forces of physics as they make pyramids up to six-feet tall and form three-person-high columns jumping the rope all the while.

EPILOGUE

A triumphant beat of the drum calls a close to the fanciful universe of Dralion. Performers spin about on stage while a solo performance of the Chinese drum fills the air. Thunderous applause erupts from those who are there to witness the spectacle... and the natural order of time is returned. Dralion has ended.

/// **MIRACULA AETERNITATIS**

Today's Dralion is much different from the show that premiered under Cirque's trademarked Blue-and-Yellow Big Top, raised on the grounds adjacent to Cirque du Soleil Studio at 8400, 2e Avenue in the St-Michel district (the only show to have done so), or in what you see in the limitedly-timed DVD.

For example, the first big change to the show's line-up (besides the firing of the original clowns, and the loss of their replacement – Les Voila) occurred in 2005 with the removal of the Teeterboard act, replacing it with a Trampoline number that took advantage of Dralion's sizeable metallic backdrop (imagine jumpers using Dralion's wall in similar style to that found in La Nouba and you'd get the idea). Occasionally other acts would rotate in and out to fill in, and some of these would be different based on the Chinese team then performing (there were four groups on an 18-month rotation). Therefore, you might be blessed with the opportunity to see two young girls perform Contortion with Bowls (which is as it sounds: a contortion act presented whilst balancing special bowls at various points on their bodies), but most often you'd get to see Foot Juggling (an ancient Chinese art form whereby the performer juggles a paper umbrella using only her feet). If you were extremely lucky, though, you might have seen a rousing Aerial Hoop performance by Marie-Michelle Faber.

By the end of its big top tour much of the show unfolded exactly as it was originally created. On January 18, 2010, the show took its "final" bow in Mexico City after 10 years touring – the speculation was that Cirque's contract with its partner, Chinese Flag Circus, had come to an end. The retirement was short-lived however, as Guy Laliberté announced the next day the show would continue its adventure in the arena format, pioneered by Saltimbanco... and change in many ways. In addition to retiring Foot Juggling, the show also lost its Double Trapeze and Ballet on Lights performances, replacing them with a primary Aerial Hoop performance, and a ballet act called Medusa (similar to Balance on Lights without the lights) and two new acts-in-rotation: Balancing on Chairs (In the Chairs act, the artist delicately stacks chairs to create a tower on which to perform a balancing act that displays the human body at the very peak of condition and muscular control) and Solo Diabolo (Chinese yo-yo).

Although today Dralion continues to tour in the arena format, its life is about to be cut short again soon. On April 9, 2014, word was passed down through the artists that DRALION would have its last performance sometime in January 2015. While official word has yet to be announced, the closing of DRALION would meet with current trends. But what an amazing run!

Milestones		
Performance	Date	Location
500 th	8/xx/2000	Minneapolis, MN
1000 th	12/16/2001	Dallas, TX
2000 th	11/5/2004	Madrid, Spain
2500 th	5/13/2006	Valencia, Spain
3000 th	10/2/2007	Osaka, Japan
3500 th	1/31/2009	Perth, Australia
4000 th	4/1/2011	Des Moines, IA (Arena)
4500 th	11/9/2012	Fresno, CA (Arena)

* * *

It's true that in the beginning the internal reaction to Dralion was, as Cirque put it, "less than generous" – as the change from the old order was too much for some – Dralion quickly found its audience and became one of Cirque du Soleil's top-grossing touring shows. Even the 2000 filming of the show became the recipient of three Primetime Emmy Awards: Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Special; Outstanding Directing for a Variety or Musical; and Outstanding Costumes for a Variety or Music Program.

A vibrant, stylized poster for the Cirque du Soleil show 'Journey of Man'. The background is a rich, dark purple with swirling, Art Deco-inspired patterns. In the upper left, a woman with white face paint and yellow eye makeup looks upwards. In the upper right, a man with a large yellow crown, blue face paint, and a blue ruffled collar has his mouth open in a wide, expressive gesture. At the bottom center, a woman in a shimmering yellow outfit with fringe and a headscarf is seated, holding a thin black staff. The text 'CIRQUE DU SOLEIL' is in a yellow, serif font, and 'JOURNEY OF MAN' is in a large, white, outlined serif font.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL
**JOURNEY
OF MAN**

JOURNEY OF MAN

An imaginative allegory about the passage of life, from birth to maturity.

After its release on European and Australian screens, Cirque du Soleil *Journey of Man*, the first large format 3D/2D film featuring Cirque du Soleil made its debut in North America on May 2, 2000.

Directed by Keith Melton, *Journey of Man* uses the power of large format film to fully immerse the audience in the fantasy of the Cirque du Soleil experience. Filmed over a four month period using an IMAX Solido twin camera with 70mm film, this 38-minute three-dimensional adventure enlightens our senses with an imaginative allegory, following the adventures of a child as he experiences the mystical journey of life from birth through childhood, adulthood, and maturity. Each stage is represented by a unique Cirque du Soleil act shot in extraordinary natural and historical landmarks around the world.

The producers of *Journey of Man* saw the film as a unique opportunity to take the Cirque du Soleil performers out from under the "big top" or permanent theater and place them in a bold cinematic experience. Expanding beyond the "big top", the Cirque du Soleil artists were filmed on location in various unique settings throughout the world, including the ocean off the Bahamas; through a giant redwood forest in California; transported to the Nevada desert; the Green Gables estate in San Mateo, California; the opulence of Severance Hall in Cleveland, Ohio; and the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The odyssey includes the percussive rhythms of the Taiko Drummers, aquatic ballet by the Synchronized Swimmers, aerial ballet with the Bungees (yellow bird-like characters), Cube Man's juggling, the incredible Statue Act and Russian Banquine acrobatics. Shall we take the journey?

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	May 5, 2000
Type:	IMAX Film
Director:	Keith Melton
Composer:	Benoît Jutras

Creative Team

Guide	Co-Producer
Guy Laliberté	Antione Compin
Director	Co-Producer
Keith Melton	Charis Horton
Producer	Cinematography
Andre Picard	Reed Smoot
Producer	Cinematography
Peter Wagg	John Hora
Composer	Co-Writer
Benoît Jutras	Peter Wagg
Film Editing	Co-Writer
Harry B. Miller III	Steve Roberts

/// PASSAGES

The magical odyssey begins with a resounding "Big Bang" as an explosion of light and sound sends shock waves rippling throughout the universe. As the cosmic dust clears, the Taiko Drummers appear as prehistoric cave dwellers. Within a womb-like cave, an embryonic child appears and the pulsating tribal rhythms of the Taiko Drummers signal the initial heartbeats of life. Graceful Synchronized Swimmers interpret the miracle of birth in a breathtaking underwater performance. As water is a necessary element for all living things, the bubbling deep blue water serves as a harbor to bring forth life.

The Child, pure and innocent, is the Universal Child -- seen in *Salimbanco*. He is surrounded in a womb-like cave, which consequently is the only man-made set in the entire film. His companions are the Tribe - the Taiko drummers from *Mystère*, under the direction of Pierre Dubé. Together, they set the scene for the first stage in development: the breath of life. Next, an elegant display of aquatic synchronization dazzles us. Water, the universal element, provides nourishment for our child and sets the scene for his birth.

The young life begins in a place filled with incredible sights and sounds; childhood is seen as a fantastic fantasy world where everything is larger than life. It is here where the Universal Child meets his instincts, the Flounes, who take him by the hand and guide him on his way. These two clowns introduce Child to his emotions. The male Floune is the risk-taker, always sure of himself. For him, everything is possible. Willing to try anything, he is full of wild energy. The female Floune is bright but cautious. She is balanced and respects both sides of every choice. They are each other's counterpart.

The second stage of life begins in a forest outside of Boulder Creek, California. Among the giant redwood trees fly the birds of this narration: the Bungees. It is also where our child explores his inner self and comes in contact with his instincts for the first time. These instincts, represented by two clowns - a male and female - are as complimentary to one another as they are not. Known only as Flounes, they provide consciousness to our child. The male is the confident risk-taker. He has an enormous cache of energy and is willing to try just about anything, no matter how dangerous it may be. The female, the intelligent and thoughtful one, is as cautious as she is considerate. She weighs all the consequences of a choice carefully before deciding to act.

In the company of his instinctual guides, the Flounes, Child experiences wonder, fear and courage. Unexpectedly, the Bungees-extraordinary yellow bird-like creatures dive from the treetops. At first, Child runs and hides, fearing the unfamiliar enormous bird that appears before him. His courage building, Child moves closer, startled yet amazed at the free-flying creatures. In awe of their graceful acrobatic movements, Child stretches out his arms, anxious to experience the wild freedom of their aerial ballet.

The Bungees fantastic performance is only a hint of what is to come for Child. Just as childhood can pass quickly, the Bungees suddenly grab hold and hurl the Universal Child into adolescence, in a dramatic rite of passage.

Wondrous creatures, too, inhabit the forest. From *Mystère*: The Palmiers (big orange creatures that look like giant Pumpkins), a Giant Stork and the double-face of the Asticots, a creature who slithers the lengths of the giant trees. But it is the Bungees that capture the child's attention. For the first time, fear, wonder and courage appear within him as the flamboyantly costumed birds appear from the heavens. They take hold of him and propel him to another plane... another stage of development: into adolescence!

Unlike the confined world of childhood, the adolescent Youth's newfound surroundings are wide open. His choices for the direction he decides to take on the next stage of his journey are limitless. However, Youth is drawn down the path to manhood by the Cube Man. The Cube Man's skillful command of gyrating a giant metallic cube exhibits great strength, and inspires Youth to become more strong and daring. His new found sense of confidence gives him the courage to race along to the next stage in his life. It is during Adolescence that our protagonist, no longer a child, but not quite a man, comes upon the Cube Man (performed by Mikhail Matorin from *Mystère*). Hidden in the Valley of Fire state park in Nevada, the youth learns strength and stamina as the man wields his metallic cube from atop a rocky precipice.

As Youth begins the journey to manhood, he discovers the bond between a man and a woman. In a 17th century-style garden, two statues seemingly come to life. Exercising great stamina, the Statue Act performers join together in a harmonious balancing act that illustrates the reciprocity of love between a man and a woman. Ultimately, greed proves a more powerful force than love when Man finds himself tempted with an offer of wealth by the demon-like Stiltman. Man believes that wealth will give him the ability to possess anything he so desires. With this power, he can acquire love, like any other possession.

After learning this, he next finds himself in the confines of a garden. (San Mateo, California). Here he witnesses a spectacular act of love and grace. The male-female pair, looking like statues, perform their act upon a lone lily pad, in the center of a pond. It is here the man learns harmony, balance and the strength of union. The pair, Yves Décoste and Marie-Laurie Mesnage from *Quidam*. Man eventually realizes that despite his wealth and power there is something missing from his life. Enter the Banquine. These performers put on a rousing display of phenomenal acrobatic feats. Their spectacular performance reveals the child within every adult and Man recaptures the joy of his youth. They help him remember the important things of life and he realizes that wealth does not matter as much to him.

But there's trouble here. Mephisto, a demon from the dark recesses of the mind tries to tempt our Everyman... He represents greed and everything dark in society. Thankfully, Everyman is not easily deterred and finds himself in an elegant hall where an amazing display of acrobatics is taking place. Filmed in Severance Hall in Cleveland, USA, the Banquine artists from *Quidam* wield their fanciful talents to remind our Everyman, who has matured, that there are more important things to life than to acquire wealth. And so, he recaptures his youthful joy and the Journey of Man begins again.

The final stop on Man's journey, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany, signifies the hope for the future of mankind. In hindsight, Mature Man has realized that Dreams, Faith and Love, are the necessary keys to life to become a complete human being. These three keys can open doors to endless possibilities. Signaling the dawn of a new beginning, Mature Man hands over the knowledge of his generation to the next. In his wisdom, Mature Man advises that although this adventure may have been his own unique journey, it is truly the destination of all mankind.

Our story ends at the Brandenburg Gate, in Berlin, Germany. However, this does not end the Journey of Man -- how it was created, and the pains that the producers, directors and performers had to go through to bring us this magnificent film.

/// BEHIND THE LENS

As we've seen, the film adapts individual sequences from several Cirque du Soleil productions to a variety of indoor and outdoor settings, fitting them into the story. "Through [producer] Peter Wagg, we worked hand in hand with Cirque du Soleil throughout the project, to create a giant screen that was unique on its own terms yet true to the spirit of a Cirque stage show," says Keith Melton, who directed the film. This was the first large-format feature for Melton, who has numerous 3D and special venue short films to his credit, including *To Dream of Roses*, *Pirates, 007: License to Thrill*, and *The Lost M Adventure*.

"The power of Cirque du Soleil Journey of Man is the power of physical performance," explains Melton. "Shots are held longer than usual to capture this performance and to create a dreamlike pace, with CG flashiness kept to a minimum." DP Reed Smoot and 3D supervisor Peter Anderson were key collaborators in realizing Melton's vision. Although he has lensed many large-format films, this was Smoot's first 3D production, while Anderson is a 3D specialist well known in the special venue business. "We came up with approaches specific to stereo-photography, to create a strong sense of depth," says Smoot. "Keith's philosophy was not to demonstrate the 3D format per se, but to use it as a tool to effectively tell the story. My gaffer, Dwight Campbell, did an extraordinary job in getting a specific look."

"It was a priority to find the most beautiful locations we possibly could," says production designer John Zachary. Filming Journey of Man around the world was a logistical challenge mainly due to the incredible schedules of the performers. Unlike a typical feature film in which the actors' sole job is to act, the Cirque du Soleil artists had to play dual roles. Working seven days a week, they performed on stage throughout the week and then acted in the film on their days off. Since the artists were on tour in a variety of shows, in different countries on different continents, the entire production of the film had to be coordinated in conjunction with the location and availability of the artists.

Our adventure begins in the vast void of space; a cold place but a fresh canvas. And even though space is cold, we are not alone. Everything to create and sustain life is upon us... and then, an explosion permeates that vastness, sending a flash of brilliance rippling throughout the universe. Creation! The Birth of the Universe -- Yes! The stars, the planets, everything is created before our eyes... and man. Cirque du Soleil Journey of Man is a celebration of the human spirit that combines the unique artistry and music of Cirque du Soleil with the power of large format film.

The Beginnings of Life and Birth - Stage One

The opening sequence of Cirque du Soleil Journey of Man featuring the ancient Japanese art form of Taïko, is actually the only scene shot on a set. Constructed out of sculpted Styrofoam, the Taïko Drummers' cave was not shot inside a remote mountain range but inside a warehouse in Las Vegas. According to Co-Producers, Antoine Compin and Charis Horton, the 30 by 40-foot cave was made in different sections and the various pieces were placed on a raised stage with eight turntables underneath to maneuver the set.

"We shot on a set because we could not move the Taïko drums out into the elements, they are fragile and tuned very finely," says Horton. The Taïko Drummers play at *Mystère* in Las Vegas. The filmmakers had only two days to rehearse and shoot the scenes since the performers and equipment were only available on two days of the week. "Since we could only film the Taïko performers the two days out of the week that there are no shows scheduled, we could not take time out to move the performers and equipment to a remote shoot. So instead, we shot the scenes in a warehouse in Las Vegas and we put the drums on a flatbed trailer and moved them to the warehouse at night," says Compin.

However, throughout most of the film, the performers were faced with the challenge of performing their acts out of the protective setting of the big top or fixed theater and in the unpredictable environment of the great outdoors. The filmmakers shot in just about every type of location imaginable, from underwater, in the desert, to being suspended in mid-air. An early scene in the film is an original underwater sequence choreographed by Sylvie Frechette specifically for the film and performed by synchronized swimmers from the cast of *O*, the troupe's show at the Bellagio. "Originally, the producers wanted to use a tank," says Melton. "We explored every tank in the world. Either the tank was not big enough, we couldn't heat it to the temperature our swimmers needed, or we would have to dress it. I pushed for a real location."

It was necessary to find a body of water that was 85 degrees for the Synchronized Swimmers to perform. "For the underwater scenes, we originally tried to find tanks so that we could have more controlled shooting conditions, but there are a limited number of tanks in the world and we could not find one large enough to suit our purposes. So we realized that we had to shoot outside and there are only a few places in the world where the water temperature was suitable to shoot in December," remarks Producer Peter Wagg. "Location manager Steve Dayan set us up in the Bahamas, added Melton, "where they shot underwater with special lighting units, 15 crew members below the surface, and six support ships above." Although they shot in the Bahamas, it was still not an easy task in December. "We had to create new temperatures for the swimmers because the highest temperature we could get at that time of year was 65 degrees. To keep them warm, we had to create special suits and put weights within all the costumes because of the buoyancy factor of the saltwater," adds Wagg.

Before the shoot began, the swimmers rehearsed at the underwater stage at "O" at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. Never having swum in open water, the swimmers were brought in to the Bahamas early to get acclimated to swimming in the ocean where they were filmed in 30 feet of water.

"The sequence just goes into deep, deep blue; you're clearly 20'-30' underwater," says Melton, who was submerged for four- to five-hour shoots, breathing through a regulator. Via a second regulator and earphones, he spoke to the underwater cameraman, Bob Cranston. "When I needed to talk to the performers, I would literally take the regulator out and talk to them through the water. They could understand me, although I couldn't understand them," says the director.

During the shoot, the underwater crew consisted of director Keith Melton, three camera operators, three to four gaffers and grips, seven underwater swimmers, and two to three support divers. The support divers were there to assist the swimmers, two of the support divers held large air tanks that had four umbilical regulators attached to it. There was also a support crew in boat on water that contained a generator and another that held a bank of state-of-the-art underwater lights. The underwater team developed a system of hand signals to communicate with each other. From behind the camera, Melton used a horn to alert the crew and the performers as to when filming was to begin. The shoot took five days, plus three days' rehearsal. "Everyone got shriveled up, but the costumes and makeup helped hide it." The performers had never swum in open water before, and the saltwater made them more buoyant. They needed eye gear and special makeup, and to keep them down, thin sheets of lead were put into their costumes. "They were wearing lead bras, lead waist belts, and lead packets around their ankles and arms," says Melton. "All the key crew members were divers, including myself. I've never been in such good shape. I was to-the-bone exhausted every day."

The scene was lit with four 8K HMI underwater lights made by Pace Technologies. "These are big, soft ambient fill lights," says Campbell. "We would modularly build the lights before taking them in the water. Within 45 minutes of arrival, we had the lights in there and working."

The IMAX Solido camera was encased inside a huge metal bubble, suspended by a crane and then dropped from a boat into the water. A series of weights attached to the camera enables the camera to maintain a balance while it floats in the water guided by the operator and his assistant. Shooting underwater was very time-consuming. Since each film load contains only enough film to shoot for three minutes, the crew had to repeat the process of lowering the camera into the water and placing it into position, shooting the scene, taking the camera back to the crane, raise it out of the water, lift it onto the boat, remove the film, clean the camera, reload more film, close and seal the camera, drop it back into the water, and move it back into position to shoot the rest of the scene. While the film was being reloaded, the underwater crew took advantage of this time to get out of the water and warm up. Turnaround time between each shot was approximately one hour!

Childhood - Stage Two

For the Bungee scenes, we move out of the water and into the air, suspended from the giant redwoods of Big Basin State Park, in Boulder Creek, California. "In the live show, the Bungees perform in a controlled environment on a set under a big top or theater. By taking them outdoors, we were able to take advantage of the beautiful greens and earthtones of the redwoods and contrast those colors with the bright yellows of the costumes. In the theater, the spectator does not have the opportunity to see up close the fabulous detail that goes into all the costumes," says Wagg.

The Bungee scenes were the first ones shot for the film outdoors. Having good weather was extremely crucial to get the location work off to a timely start. The shoot had to coincide with the availability of the performers; they had only five days to shoot the film before beginning the Asia-Pacific Tour of the show Saltimbanco .

Besides a concern for the weather, the filmmakers had to make sure that there was sufficient light for the forest shoot. Within the dense redwoods there was very little sunlight and a 3D film requires a lot of light to increase the depth of field. The filmmakers therefore had to bring in a large lighting package that was two to three times the size used for a typical feature film. "We had so many trucks, electrical generators, and cranes, along with miles of cable running along the road that cut into the forest to our shooting location, we nicknamed the passageway 'Iron Alley,'" says Wagg.

In preparation for the job, Zachary viewed several existing large-format films, including the 3D film T-Rex: Back to the Cretaceous, which had the same producers as Journey of Man, Antoine Compin and Charis Horton. Zachary liked the forest settings of T-Rex so well that he used the same greens supplier, Michael McComb, for the redwood forest sequence in Journey of Man, which features a bungee-cord performance taken from the Saltimbanco show. The huge redwoods dwarf the players and make them seem elf-like. The set was nicknamed Iron Alley because of the vast quantity of lighting and other equipment brought in.

"We wanted an ethereal look," explains Smoot, "so we punched in lots of tungsten mixed with blue light. In the background, we had the natural light of the sun, and we kicked up smoke that was bluish by comparison. The warm/cool contrast helped create depth. There were lots of lights on dimmers, lots of big soft lights stuck way in the background. We had a forest of cranes and cherry-pickers. In a large-format 3D film, you need to do whatever you can to increase depth of field," Smoot continues. "It's crucial to have tremendous amounts of light. Altogether we had 21/2 thousand amps of lights burning in the forest."

The Iron Alley setup included three large Condors and three banks of Ultralight 1,200W PAR-64 Dino light globes. "We set them up in a 6 x 6 configuration and separated the circuits in order to address each column as a bank on the dimmer board," says Campbell. "We checkerboarded the bulbs: medium-spot-medium-spot. It allowed us to use the spot to align the lamp and the medium to illuminate the area." The forest of lights also included 20K Skypans and pre-WWII 5K beam projectors from Mole Richardson. "Those beam projectors are like the xenon lamp of the tungsten world," he adds. "They use a Bausch & Lomb reflector and make a serious beam of light and a lot of heat. In the old days, they were used for lighting trees in motion picture studios; greens absorb a lot of light."

Instead of the white costumes the troupe normally wears for its stage performance of this act, Melton opted to transplant from Mystere some gold costumes with tassels and reflective beads. As with all artistic decisions on the production, the change had to be approved by Peter Wagg. "It's very difficult to change anything artistically with Cirque, because they are so conscious of keeping creative control," says Melton, "and that's what makes them powerful and unique."

We had to change the makeup from a stage look to a cinematic look: on film you see everything, so the makeup had to be more precise and intricate." Makeup artist Stephan Dupuis, whose experience includes *The Mask* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, is a prosthetic and special makeup specialist. Says Melton, "The Cirque people were cautious and careful at first with Stephan, but ultimately embraced him."

With so much equipment in the confined space of the forest, the filmmakers had to exercise caution to make sure that none of it appeared in the film. "There is a rectangular rig suspended from the trees that holds a circular sky pan for lighting. We turned it off when we filmed upwards, but it was still visible. We digitally eliminated the sky pan in that scene so that when the audience looks up through the trees they will only see the sky," says Melton. The filmmakers used the redwoods to create a gigantization of the world from a child's-eye point of view and utilized the Iwerks 8/70 rig to enhance this effect in 3D. The Iwerks 8-perforation/70mm camera allowed the filmmakers to vary the inter-ocular setting. Inter-ocular is the perspective created by the distance between two lenses. Adjusting the inter-ocular distance between two lenses can cause an image to appear in miniature or enormous.

The average distance between a human's eyes is about 2 1/2" apart. The twin 3D-camera lenses are therefore set at about the same distance to create 3D images in a normal perspective. To illustrate the effect of changing the interocular distance, director Keith Melton says "imagine if you were a giant, your eyes would be further apart and the world would appear smaller to you, if you were a mouse your eyes would be closer together and the world would look much larger." By using this effect, Melton was able to make the redwood forest and its inhabitants, the Palmiers, Giant Stork and Double Face, appear larger than life.

Youth - Stage Three

To film the Cube Man sequence, the production headed to Valley of Fire State Park in the Nevada desert. Shot in December and at night, the weather was a constant problem during the filming of the scene. The crew faced extreme weather conditions, from very high winds to a very low wind chill factor and even a snowstorm. Meanwhile, Mikhail, the performer, had to shoot the scene wearing very little clothing. The flame that sets the cube on fire at the climax of the Cube Man performance was enhanced in post-production to make the night scene even more powerful. "The scenes were shot at night because the spinning cube does not look very dramatic in full daylight against a bright blue sky. But in the dark, the scene becomes magical with the lights flickering off the metallic cube," says Wagg. "We specifically shot the Cube Man sequence in the desert because we liked the monumental bizarre shapes and the deep rich earth tones against which Mikhail, the Cube Man, flies with a red cape. It was an attempt to go with a color scheme that would complement the setting and be very theatrical by nature," adds Melton.

Adulthood - Stage Four

This sequence in the film reproduces the statue act from *Quidam*, the Cirque production on tour. "I wanted a semi-surreal location that would involve water and be reflective," says Melton. "It became the most challenging location to find." "Originally, we wanted to shoot the statues at Mono Lake [in California]," recalls Zachary. "But it was too cold. After we got off Mono Lake, we started looking for a beautiful, lush garden." They opted for a private mansion in San Jose with a Roman-style reflecting pool designed by Greene & Greene. The 60' x 120' pool hadn't been maintained and was murky with moss and algae. The water was dyed black, to enhance its reflectiveness, contrast with the gray marble of the performers' makeup, and hide the working platform, which included dolly tracks to move 400lbs worth of camera, camera head, and dolly around the performers. "We used a Cartoni base and a gear head that allows you to pan and tilt," says Melton.

The Statue Act was filmed at a Renaissance-style garden reflecting pool located at a private estate called Green Gables in San Mateo, California. "I found Green Gables in a book that I had of old gardens, so we sent the location manager up there to find the house and the people to see if they would let us shoot there," says Horton. When the filmmakers arrived at Green Gables, they drained all the water out of the pool, scrubbed it clean and then refilled it with water and black dye. The dye was added to the water to give it a more reflective and dramatic look. They built a lily pad platform in the middle and placed camera tracks under water so that the camera could easily be maneuvered around the Statue Act, while a crane was placed off to the side of the pool to use for aerial shots. The Statue Act was filmed on a delicate lily pad in a pond as a visual metaphor for the sturdiness of marriage conveying harmony, balance, strength and union.

"I had to create the Indian Ocean onstage once, dyed black to make it look deep," says Zachary. Because the pool used for the statues scene drained into a nearby creek, he had to select something environmentally neutral. "We found a dye that could be bleached out by adding chlorine, and then the chlorine could be neutralized."

Mature Adult - Stage Five

Budget was not the only factor in being able to film on location; the geographical choices were dictated by the availability of the performers. Some locations proved to be more difficult to determine than others. The one filming location that became difficult to find was for the Banquine. Since the Banquine were in Washington D.C. at the time, touring with the show *Quidam* the production elected for a site that was on or near the East Coast. "Our location scout contacted all the film commissions across the United States. We were sent photographs from the Cleveland Film Commission of a concert hall in Cleveland. The marble lobby looked fantastic. It was not the Palace of Versailles look that I envisioned originally, but the moment I saw it I thought it was fantastic as well as being practical!" says Wagg.

Compin and Horton note that Severance Hall, home to the Cleveland Orchestra, had the unique distinction of being one of the few opulent buildings in the United States and the world with an unobstructed forty-foot high ceiling. The producers needed to find a place with an extremely high ceiling for the Banquine to perform their four-high acrobatic formations.

Several other notable locations were considered for the Banquine including the Marble House in Newport, Rhode Island. These locations ultimately proved unsuitable, particularly as chandeliers would have gotten in the way! Filming at Severance Hall presented itself with its own dilemma of coordinating the production of the film with performances of the resident Cleveland Orchestra. The orchestra was performing some nights during the week while the crew was shooting during the day, so they had to break down all the equipment before the public arrived for the performances at night. Additionally, it was not an easy task of keeping the lights out of view from the wide lens of the IMAX camera, as there were a large number of lighting units needed to light the high-ceiling lobby.

Maturity - Stage Six

For the finale of the film, the filmmakers watered down the street in front of the Brandenburg Gate to give it a more visually dramatic look, befitting such a powerful symbol. The rebirth of the center of Berlin and the opening of the historic gateway is used to symbolize the hope and a new beginning. Behind the gate, a computer-generated sun rises. "It becomes a really beautiful magical sunrise, it is a new dawn against the very barren monument of the Brandenburg Gate," says Melton. As the scene closes, the camera tilts up and looks into the stars, flying into the aurora borealis where the film began. "The story comes full circle, literally, to convey that the journey continues. It is meant to be visually more surreal than real, something very uplifting, dramatic and bold. It serves as a bookend to the show," adds Melton.

* * *

Cirque du Soleil *Journey of Man* is a breathtaking odyssey that follows the stages of human development from birth to maturity, with each stage presented by a Cirque du Soleil act. The signature Cirque du Soleil celebration of color, light, music and costume combine with a backdrop of various natural and historical landmarks around the world, creating a triumph of artistry beyond compare. From the opening explosion of light and sound that represents the universe's formation, Cirque du Soleil *Journey of Man* leads us through the birth of the Universal Child as it travels from childhood, through adolescence and manhood, on to maturity. An awe-inspiring feast for the senses, incomparable artistry and stylish elegance make this an adventure of a lifetime. Catch *Journey of Man* on VHS, DVD, Blu-Ray or Digital Distribution where applicable.



VAREKAI™

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL®

Deep within a forest, at the summit of a volcano, exists an extraordinary world - where anything is possible...

VAREKAI

From all accounts Dralion was a box-office success; however, it was not always seen as a critical success by the Cirque's fans. Many commented that the show seemed more "off the shelf" than previous productions, and as such did not feel immersed in the world created for them like they had been for La Nouba, "O", Quidam, Alegría, Mystère and Saltimbanco before that. Much of that sentiment has its basis in truth: a great deal of Dralion is an "off the shelf" Chinese touring circus that was purchased wholesale, deconstructed, and re-constituted in the Cirque-fashion. Why? As we discovered, tensions were high for a new show to follow Quidam and to show the world Cirque could live without Franco Dragone at the creative helm. So, just as soon as the first standing ovations had been given to Dralion in the spring of 1999, fans began to wonder what might follow. Hearing on November 16, 2011 about a new touring show to launch the following spring was welcome news indeed. It ended months of speculation regarding Cirque's future touring prospects.

This new production would be the brainchild of a team of twelve creators, many of whom were working with Cirque du Soleil for the first time, including the Director, Dominic Champagne. This new production would be an odyssey inspired by the bond between circus artists, acrobats, dancers, jugglers, contortionists, clowns and actors who come from the four corners of the world to express the beauty and joy of transcending limits. "Every day, regardless of where the wind blows them, they risk their lives to defy laws of gravity and leap over volcanoes, showing the world that something else is possible."

And it would prove without a doubt that Cirque du Soleil could and would continue without Franco Dragone.

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	April 24, 2002 (Bigtop) December 13, 2012 (Arena)
Type:	Touring / Bigtop & Arena
Director:	Dominic Champagne
Composer:	Violaine Corradi
Finale:	November 24, 2013 (Bigtop) Currently Touring (Arena)

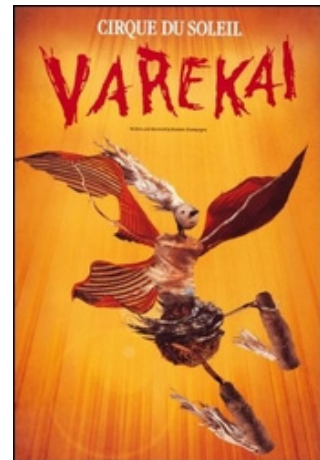
Creative Team

Guide	Composer
Guy Laliberté	Violaine Corradi
Director	Rigging Designer
Dominic Champagne	Jaque Paquin
Creation	Lighting Designer
Andrew Watson	Nol Van Genuchten
Choreographer	Sound Designer
Debra Brown	François Bergeron
Set Designer	Costume Designer
Stéphane Roy	Eiko Ishioka
Choreographer	Makeup Designer
Michael Montanaro	Nathalie Gagné
Aerial Acts	Clown Acts
André Simard	Cal McCrystal

/// WHEREVER IS VAREKAI

After the initial announcement was made, speculation regarding the show's theme, acts and accompanying music became the topics du jour. One such topic was, of course, the show's name. Early on it was suggested the working name of the show was ROM. On the outside, that sounded very simple and un-Cirque-like, however, the name "ROM" fit perfectly with the rumored theme of the show: gypsies. In the Romany language of the Gypsy's, ROM translates to "Man". And it's no worse than some of the other working titles attributed to shows past... RAMDAM anyone?

In the meantime, news and rumors regarding possible cast members began pouring in. In February 2002 rumors swirled that John Gilkey, who made his character "John" famous in the North American tour of Quidam (and the Quidam DVD) would be returning to Cirque. And Olga Pikhienko, the limber Russian hand-balancer of Quidam was also rumored to have joined the new production. Both turned out to be true! Of course much later – through the reality television series FIRE WITHIN – we learned how the two came to join the production and other elements of its creation, all of which were out of our point of views at the time. Our first glimpse of the show came at 11:00am on Tuesday, April 2, 2002 as Cirque du Soleil released their names (and more) in a special never-before done-in-the-history-of-the-company web cast. During the web cast, the world was introduced to the show's music, some of its costumes and a few of its acts. But, probably the most important aspect of the web cast was the unveiling of the show's name and its concept...



The world of Varekai is a mysterious, lush realm that 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 Gypsies - 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 Athenian craftsman and artisan Daedalus. His is a story of how excitement can cloud one's better judgment. As Greek legend tells, Daedalus crafts two magnificent pairs of wings out of feathers and wax for himself and his brash young son (Icarus) for their escape from imprisonment on the isle of Crete. Before taking off Daedalus warns his son first of complacency and then of hubris, asking that he not fly too low nor too high because the sea's dampness would clog, and the sun's heat would melt his wings. Overcome by the giddiness that flying lent him, Icarus soared through the sky curiously and, failing to heed his father's warnings, strayed too close to the sun and melted the wax. Icarus kept flapping, but soon realized he had no feathers left to keep him aloft, thus Icarus fell into the sea and drowned.

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 is given the chance to redeem himself. Much of the story is told through the show's score. To create the musical score for VAREKAI, Violaine Corradi drew inspiration from the vast repertoire of world music. *"In circus, the music envelops the audience. It makes the audience feel the difficulties, the danger, the lightness or dizziness, and, sometimes, it can even reassure."*

Each piece seems to evoke a meeting or juxtaposition of different cultures, which are not always identifiable. Violaine Corradi combined the sounds of Hawaiian ritual, the songs of 11th century troubadours from the south of France, traditional Armenian melodies and gospel music with contemporary arrangements to conjure up the unique musical universe of Varekai. The 7-piece band includes a bandleader/keyboards player, a second keyboard player, drummer, percussionist, bassist, violinist and a wind instruments player, plus 2 singers — one male (The Patriarch) and one female (The Muse).

Her melodies and the band's play reach us via the show's sound design, which was the work of 14-year Cirque veteran Francois Bergeron, whose designs also include "O", La Nouba and Quidam. "I think this is definitely one of the best-sounding Cirque tours yet, and that's in part because I was able to position the speakers to maximum advantage." Unlike some of his previous efforts, where sound design was largely an after-the-fact process, with Varekai Bergeron was on the creative team from the early conceptual stages.

"Because I was involved with the show from the beginning, I was able to fully integrate the audio elements into the overall concept and into the set," he says. "The sound basically reinforces the set design, with the power emanating from the center above the stage. I think this is definitely one of the best-sounding Cirque tours yet, and that's in part because I was able to position the speakers to maximum advantage." According to Bergeron, the tent's flexible PVC skin, when stretched taut, presents a surprisingly hard acoustical surface and is highly reflective at problematic frequencies. "It's really quite reverberant, especially when empty," he says. "For example, at 1 kHz we measured a reverb time of about 5.4 seconds. So you have to be careful with your coverage and alignment of speakers."

To supply the needed power from above the stage while avoiding destructive reflections, Bergeron devised a system comprising three center clusters and an outer delay ring. While these clusters anchor the sound high above the stage, supplemental reinforcement is supplied by the delay ring. Deep bass power, which for both logistical and artistic reasons also had to come from above, is provided by four PSW-2 High-Power Flyable subwoofers that are hoisted up in the cupola.

Covering all this up is a fantastic structure of set and stage; an engaging scene for which we can thank Stéphane Roy for creating. He set out to create a contextualized set for VAREKAI — a design in which all the elements harmonize with the poetry and language of performance: costumes, scenery, and music. *"In circus, design is essentially the choice of the spatial context that the director, the other creators and the artists must inhabit. Whether abstract or realistic, it serves to create a mood."* Thus the Varekai universe is made up of...

- **THE FOREST** -- A fabulous and mysterious hideaway the VAREKAI characters have made their home in. Consisting of over 300 “trees” between 15 feet and 35 feet tall, the forest is also interspersed with twenty-odd “acrobatic trees” that its inhabitants can shinny up to see what’s going on. 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 their entire length.
- **THE STAGE** -- Extending out of the golden forest, this is the terrain on which the characters move about. It’s a golden clearing with a diameter of 42 feet. Specially designed for the show’s aesthetic and acrobatic needs, the stage harbors five traps, two turntables and an elevating platform.
- **THE CATWALK** -- Reminiscent of the spine of an immense bird, the catwalk is the invention of the forest’s inhabitants. It allows them to step outside, collect bits and pieces, and climb high in their quest to touch the sky. Used by artists to travel from one end of the stage to the other, this 100-foot-long staircase is key to their survival.
- **THE LOOKOUT** -- At the end of the catwalk, just above the audience, is the lookout—the centerpiece of the set. It’s a link to the outside world, a lookout point to see what lies ahead. This 17-square-foot platform also serves as a cabin for one of the forest’s inhabitants.

While Icarus may be the main protagonist of our story, he isn’t the only inhabitant of the forest. Eiko Ishioka, Varekai’s Costume Designer, made sure of that. Eiko Ishioka has had a hand in several artistic disciplines, including designing costumes for the cinema, theatre and opera. However, the circus arts were uncharted territory for her. For Varekai, she set herself the double challenge of designing resolutely original costumes and giving new shapes to the traditional Lycra bodysuit. *“One of my objectives at Cirque du Soleil is to design costumes that will accentuate and even reinforce the visual and emotional impact of the risks taken by the artists, while ensuring their complete safety.”*

Safety, comfort and freedom of movement are essential factors in the design of acrobatic costumes. Never losing sight of these objectives, Eiko Ishioka dreamt up exuberant costumes that make the already spectacular acrobatic feats look even more audacious. The vibrant, flamboyant colors and unusual shapes of Eiko Ishioka’s costumes accentuate the artists’ movements, enhancing their beauty and grace. She created over 130 costumes for the Varekai wardrobe, the designs of which involved finding technical solutions to ensure comfort and safety. The highly skilled costume makers fashioned the most original creations—after no less than 33,000 hours of hard work! The other inhabitants of the forest are...

- **La Promise (The Betrothed)** -- La Promise is a green butterfly who catches the eye of Icarus, who has fallen from the skies above. They meet briefly only to be taken away by the Spider Goddesses (the Triple Trapeze artists) where she metamorphs from butterfly to goddess. She makes her triumphant return (the Hand-balancing on Canes act), finds and marries Icarus who has learned to overcome his problems.

- Le Vigie (The Guide) -- He's clad in black and wears a light-bulb on his head but he's alright in my book. You'll see him at various times throughout the narrative - first taking the wings of Icarus to helping him see how to get back to his own two feet and then yielding a makeshift sword that he wields about. You'll catch him intermingling with the Skywatcher quite a bit, which turns out in the Skywatcher's favor (how many characters CAN turn OFF the light?). Le Guide is a unique character that seems to toe the line between what's good and bad. But you will find that within is a good heart, a happy soul, and a nasty headache!
- The Skywatcher -- The Skywatcher is an interesting sort; bare-chested, wearing flower-like pants and has wings on his head. You'd think he's nuts and... you'd almost be right! The Skywatcher watches the skies and protects the forest of Varekai from all sorts of nasty things - planes, cell-phones and the like. He plays a mean game of tennis, ping pong or paddle ball (whatever) and is also zany enough to make friends with a balloon/cloud, which he promptly crashes into. His zany antics run from fanning himself with a fan that doesn't work, riding a big two-wheeled cycle and attempting to change a light bulb - albeit, the one on top of The Guide's head! The skywatcher plays a major role throughout Varekai - you can't miss him!
- The Clowns -- In this world, Varekai is inhabited by two of the most interesting comical characters this side of Cirque. Separate they're a handful; together they're over-the-top. They make us laugh, cry... and sometimes make us mad but the clowns of Varekai are strikingly funny when put to the test. You'll find this duo turns up quite a bit during the performance. At first, they team up to bring us a magic act (gone terribly wrong). Later you'll see one "plug up" the Body Skating routine and the other will sing us a song of sorrow (while trying to remain in the spotlight!)

We've come to understand that the creation of Varekai was nothing less than barely controlled chaos. But in the end, everything came together for one amazing spectacle. Are you ready to enter the Dominic Champagne's forest? "It's going to be a tough audience tonight, but remember: there are three things to make this show happen - emotion, emotion and emotion. What is in your hands now is your eyes for the audience. Share this show with the audience; give your soul to touch their hearts."

/// VAAAAAREEEEEEEKAI!

"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 different acts (presented as they were at premiere), 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.

FLIGHT OF ICARUS

The story of Cirque's Icarus is a rich one, filled with the essence of freedom. Icarus, originally played by Anton Chelnokov (Tchelnokov) from Russia - who is the same young boy (now all grown up) previously seen 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 detainment, 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

Icarian Games is not only an energetic performance but an audience pleaser as well. 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). This act takes its inspiration from a long tradition of resistance in the Republic of Georgia, where inhabitants took to battle with numerous invaders over the centuries. The movements of the dancers recall the Georgians' struggles against powers that sought to dominate their land. Endurance, precision and more than a hint of frenzy mark this act. 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

Normally I wouldn't say much about an intermission for a Cirque show. Quidam's is as spooky as it is thought provoking with the Generics giving up their souls (in red balloons). Varekai ends on a more positive and upbeat note, thankfully. 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.

SLIPPERY SURFACE

The second act is opened by a colorful and lighthearted act known as Body Skating. Darting and intertwining on a specially designed sliding surface, the artists fling and catch each other, 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: Stellan 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 alumna, 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.

RUSSIAN SWINGS

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! The show ends on the high note of the Russian Swing performance. Icarus is redeemed and finds himself among friends (and even marries the green-winged forest Sprite).

/// ART AND EVOLUTION...

Anyone who's ever attended a Cirque du Soleil performance, after recovering from the initial overwhelming awe and wonder, must have wondered about the complex creation process involved. They may also have wondered about the seemingly otherworldly creative people behind the magnificent performances and magical characters created on stage. Although none of us would know it at the time, the web broadcast wouldn't be the first time Varekai would be in the limelight. In fact, much of its early life would be on display for all to see as Cirque du Soleil came to embrace not only the world-wide-web, but television audiences as a whole. For fans and newbies alike Cirque du Soleil created a 13-episode documentary entitled "Fire Within" that provided an in-depth exploration of the creation of Varekai. It would show us that the Varekai at premiere was a show barely off the ground.

Fire Within was a groundbreaking series allowing fans unprecedented access to Cirque du Soleil. It allowed us to go deep inside the company's creation process and witness the magic in the making. Fire Within also allowed us to see the human side of the Cirque. The series' raw and honest portrayal of the performers and staff showed us a side of the company that we've never been able to see before. The series' frank and candid approach is riveting. It shatters the illusion that the people at Cirque du Soleil are somehow super-human. The creation of Varekai serves only as a backdrop; the real focus is on the performers' human drama.

The series follows their struggles, their challenges, their triumphs, and their lives, and tells their stories in an honest and surprisingly personal manner. Over the course of the series we follow Oleg (Acrobatic Pas de Deux), Stella (Triple Trapeze), Olga (Hand-balancing on Canes), Raquel (Triple Trapeze), Ashley and Gareth (Icarian Games), and Kevin and Andrew (Aerial Straps). We find out that they deal with everyday issues like all of us. Things don't always go perfectly at Cirque and this series doesn't shy away from showing us the grittier side of the company that we've never seen before.

Each episode weaves several storylines together around a central theme, and frames them with creative editing and an eclectic and evocative soundtrack. But the series is not without its weaknesses. *Fire Within* focuses very heavily on some characters while only showing momentary glimpses of others. According to the Cirque website, over 1000 hours of raw footage were filmed for *Fire Within* and each of the thirteen episodes took nine weeks to edit. The hard work is evident in the quality of the finished product; a series that is as respectful as it is informative, insightful and honest. The *Fire Within* series as a whole is a monumental achievement for Cirque du Soleil worthy of its Emmy award nomination for "Outstanding Nonfiction Program Alternate".

While *Fire Within* would bring us from conception to premiere night (April 24, 2002), the evolution of *Varekai* continued forward. Those of you who are veterans of live Cirque du Soleil shows already know that you can't even get close to seeing all there is to see when you see a show only once. Add that to the fact that Cirque productions are always in flux. They always try new things to keep the show fresh. This is especially true during the first six months or so after a premiere, when the show is still in its "creation" stage.

In its earliest form (as we presented) the two halves of the show were uneven – the second half dragging almost to a halt; therefore, before the show reached Toronto, Director Dominic Champagne made many changes.

Firstly, the order of the acts was rearranged so that the Triple Trapeze was performed in the first half of the show, in the slot where Aerial Straps used to be performed. The spider goddess characters perform their act immediately after they tear hand-balancer Olga Pikhienko's character away from Icarus and ensnare her in their cage. The Triple Trapeze is immediately followed by the finale of the first half, the super-high energy Georgian Dance. The succession of these acts develops the show's *crisis* theme and makes it all the more potent, adding a degree of dramatic tension and energy that carries through intermission. In the second half, the Aerial Straps now immediately follows the Solo on Crutches. The juxtaposition of these two symbolically significant numbers, makes the show much more of a complete journey representing *catharsis*, healing and redemption for Icarus.

The change gives the show much more dramatic weight and intensity. The new order also does wonders for the fluidity of the show and allows the acts to flow together even better than before. The energy of the two halves is also more even, the second half originally being very "heavy" compared to the first. Who would have thought making this one change would have made such a difference?

Another notable change comes in the form of an absence; Tatiana Gousarova and Oleg Ouchakov (veterans of Quidam's Banquine act) are not performing regularly. Instead of the Pas de Deux, there is a replacement act. Characters hidden in the darkened forest at the back of the set toss glowing orbs into the air, a harbinger of the act to follow. A young man bursts onto the stage to perform a unique, high-energy solo juggling / manipulation number. The juggler (Octavio Allegria) is dressed in a "jester" costume (the same costume worn by the porters in Icarian Games, but with a blue and fluorescent green/yellow color scheme). The music for the act is up tempo with a South American / Brazilian influence. The juggler begins with regular juggling pins, then switches to manipulation and juggling of soccer balls. He then juggles ping-pong balls with his mouth, spitting them and catching them in rapid succession. As a finale he takes straw hats worn by the Water Meteor boys (who act as characters/assistants during the act) and throws four of them like Frisbees, but so that they return to him like boomerangs. He continues to juggle the hats making, a dramatic dive to catch the last one. This is definitely a high-caliber act and a real crowd pleaser!



Varekai would also later go under the lens in Toronto and have its music released on multiple CDs to some degree of success. By the time the show reached the shores of the United States, it had settled down nicely. All the show's songs had lyrics (with the late change in singers just before Premiere, Matheiu Lavoie didn't have time to learn them all. One song in particular – the Slippery Surface song – had no lyrics at premiere!), interludes were solid, and acts settling in. The show has remained – more-or-less - in the fashion you see on the DVD throughout the rest of its Grand Chapiteau history, even as cast members came and went. But that would eventually change. By November 24, 2013 – and after more than ten years touring the globe under the Grand Chapiteau – Cirque du Soleil held the show's final curtain call in Mexico City (October 13, 2013) so it could be reborn as the company's fifth arena show.

Did You Know?
Much of the music at Varekai's premiere was pre-recorded, with the musicians filling in as needed. Two of the interludes had accompanying music from outside the Cirque du Soleil – the Cloud and Crutches scenes. Music for these pieces was composed by Goran Bregović for the film <i>Arizona Dream</i> . These are titled "Dream" and "Death" respectively, and are commercially available on the movie's soundtrack release.

Naturally, changes to the show ensued. Staples of Varekai, such as "Water Meteors" and "Triple Trapeze" would not make the transition, and once act-in-rotation (Aerial Hoop) would become a permanent member to the show's roster, with "Baton Twirling" or "Trapeze Dance" (both are as they sound) in as a new acts-in-rotation. And so the show set sail once again throughout North America, on what could be another three to four years in the arena format.

But like or dislike the new changes, you can't argue with the fact that over the years Varekai has been viewed by more than 6 million spectators around the world, and has reached many performance milestones of its own:

- 1000th performance in Dallas, Texas - December 3, 2004
- 1500th performance in Seattle, Washington - May 30, 2006
- 2000th performance in Perth, Australia - October 5, 2007
- 2500th performance in Seville, Spain - February 24, 2009
- 3000th performance in Ostend, Belgium - August 4, 2010
- 4000th performance in Mexico City, Mexico - October 27, 2013

With Varekai being the first show to premiere whilst fan-periodical *Fascination* was in publication, we covered it greatly from top to bottom. Head over to *The Annals of Fascination* for more coverage on Varekai – including its interesting programme book, a review of its CD and DVD products, and picture book!



Fire Within

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL®

Fire Within

For anyone who's ever dreamt of running away and joining the circus, or anyone who's ever experienced a live Cirque du Soleil production and was left wondering how such a meticulously crafted work of art came to be, Cirque du Soleil's *Fire Within* offers an intimate look into the dreams, trials and aspirations of a core group of performers involved in the creation and launch of *Varekai*, then the most recent live production from world famous Cirque du Soleil. Unlike past Cirque behind the scenes features such as

"Alegría: The Truth of Illusion", "Full Circle: The Making of Quidam", "Inside La Nouba: From Conception to Perception" or "In the Heart of the Dralion" – each of which provided only a tiny taste of the entire creative process – "Fire Within" is a day-to-day peek into the lives of Cirque artists, and administrative staff as they come together to work, play, laugh, love, cry and dream.

Focusing on a few of the stories of the performers in the new show, *Fire Within* begins eight months prior to opening night. It remains to be seen how those on stage and those working behind the scenes will deal with the incredible physical and emotional demands made on them. Who will be strong enough to survive the challenging process — and more importantly, who won't? The producers had unprecedented access to the day-to-day lives of the people who played vital roles in the creation of *Varekai*. The camera captures the human experience, the burning desire inside each performer to succeed, with elements of drama, comedy, love and loss, work and play, victory and setbacks. Share the intense ups and downs the performers go through as they work together to form personal and professional relationships in Montreal, the home of Cirque du Soleil. As the tension mounts and the world premiere of *Varekai* fast approaches, all the disparate elements — performance, costumes, sets, make-up, music — must unite under the Grand Chapiteau (big top). Cirque du Soleil *Fire Within* takes us, for the first time, deep into the characters and personalities of the extraordinary men and women, both onstage and off, immersed in the creative process of creating the magic that is Cirque du Soleil.

ESSENTIALS

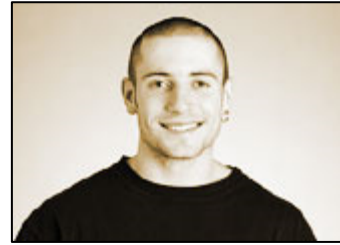
Premiere:	September 15, 2002 (Canada) January 6, 2003 (USA)
Type:	TV Series / Reality
Director:	Lewis Cohen
Composer:	Marie Côté Vincent Gagné Arnie Gelbart
Episodes:	13 / 22 minutes long

/// A TINY SPARK | THE PLAYERS

GARETH HOPKINS

AGE: 21 | HOMETOWN: London, England

ACT: Icarian Games, Character

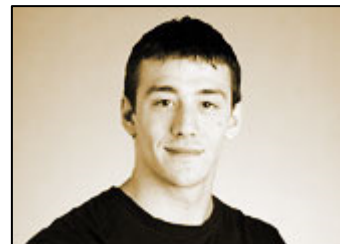


BIOGRAPHY: Gareth Hopkins is a 15-year gymnastics veteran, but very much a troubled soul. He agreed to follow partner Ashley Beaver to Cirque du Soleil, but it was not an easy decision for him. He is very attached to his family, and is struggling with homesickness in the aftermath of his parents' separation and his mother's ongoing battle with cancer. Gareth's mother urged him to pursue his talents and prior to leaving London he had the word "Mum" tattooed on his chest. Gareth (called "Gaz" by his friends) appears to be a small-but-tough inner city rebel who favors hip-hop clothing and flashy jewelry, but Cirque du Soleil Fire Within reveals a disarming sweetness and fragility. Still, Hopkins' occasional lapse of commitment and uneven attitude may cause some trouble along the way.

ASHLEY BEAVER

AGE: 25 | HOMETOWN: London, England

ACT: Icarian Games, Character



BIOGRAPHY: Four-year partner to Gareth Hopkins, Ashley Beaver's thirst for a bigger and more extravagant venture is the primary reason the pair joined Cirque du Soleil. Ashley has an extensive background in dance and music and spends much of his training session on his back (purposely), propelling Gareth into the air with his feet. Much of Ashley's fate rests in the hands — and head — of the mercurial Gareth; their individual successes are intertwined with each other. The uncertainty of his acrobatic life is mirrored in his love life — girlfriend Sarah is exploring the possibility of going on tour with him, either as a Cirque employee or as a third partner. The two are determined to remain together — even if it means choosing marriage over Varekai.

STELLA UMEH

AGE: 26 | HOMETOWN: Toronto, Canada

ACT: Triple Trapeze, Body Skating



BIOGRAPHY: Stella Umeh's background is eclectic, but her road to Cirque was straight and earnest. A decorated gymnast with the Canadian national team, she earned an athletic scholarship to UCLA before her acting and dancing aspirations led her to the stage — she made her Cirque debut in the Las Vegas production of *Mystère*. Stella's career in gymnastics began accidentally — her mother went into a local Toronto club to ask for directions and a week later, Stella was enrolled. Twenty years later, Stella's mom took her for yet another fateful drive — from Toronto to Montreal for a new adventure — vying for a spot in the newest Cirque production, *Varekai*.

With her wealth of experiences, talents and interests, Stella Umeh's background is fascinating reading material. The Toronto native has received numerous medals in international gymnastic competitions, representing Canada and the United States. In 1992, at the Barcelona Olympic Games, she ranked higher than any other Canadian woman in her discipline. She has performed in several major shows, including Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* in 2000, where she demonstrated her skill in the Korean Plank, Fast Track and Chinese Poles acts.

Stella holds a B.A. in Sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), has studied theatre at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Hollywood, and learned clown arts under Philippe Gaulier, a leading light on the European theatre scene.

Stella started doing gymnastics at age six, and took dance classes from the time she was in fourth grade. She was three-time Canadian all-around champion in 1992, 1993 and 1994, and was a member of the Canadian team that took gold at the Commonwealth Games in 1990. Recruited as a member of UCLA's gymnastics team in 1994, she served as captain in 1997 and 1998. Her group won first place at the 1997 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championships. The following year, Stella was named "Gymnast of the Year" at the Pacific-10 Conference-an annual US event. She has represented Canada at three World Gymnastics Championships, ranking 5th on the balance beam in 1992. In the performing arts, she has six shows under her belt, in addition to *Mystère*. She played leading roles in *World Rhythms on Ice*, presented at the Sea World Adventure Park in California, and in *Broken Art*, put on by the Bel-Air Drama Company.

After *Varekai*, Stella hopes to pursue a career in theatre, cinema or television, perhaps become a screenwriter or fiction author, maybe a fashion designer, or even a singer in another Cirque du Soleil show! Chances are, she'll try her hand at all of them, one at a time or simultaneously-there's just no stopping her!

RAQUEL KARRO OLIVEIRA

AGE: 25 | HOMETOWN: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ACT: Triple Trapeze, Body Skating



More artist than athlete, the sensuous and endearing Raquel Karro Oliveria (partner to Stella Umeh) caught the eye of the Cirque creative team for her sense of movement and character portrayals. Raquel grew up in a small village in southern Brazil, but has lived in Rio with her boyfriend, Ricardo, for the past few years. Raquel Karro's performing career began when she was seven years old in Itaquí, Brazil. Like many young girls her age, she started taking classical and jazz ballet classes. She also had a keen interest in theatre, and decided to study drama when she entered university in 1994. She would discover the world of the circus the following year. "I didn't even know you could take courses in the circus arts," she says, still surprised to this day. The courses were provided free by the Brazilian government, in Rio de Janeiro.

Raquel juggled these two forms of entertainment until 1997, when she abandoned her first love to devote herself entirely to her new-found passion, the circus. Her efforts paid off, for she was quickly snapped up by the Intrepida Trupe, a large circus company in her native Brazil. A few years later, in summer 2000, she and four friends founded a troupe called No-Ar ("In the Air"), specializing in aerial and flying silks acts. When Cirque du Soleil talent scouts visited Brazil in December of that same year, Raquel auditioned, but didn't expect anything to come of it. She ended up being invited to attend the general training session in Montreal, in May 2001.

Upon returning to Brazil, she continued to teach and to develop acts with her No-Ar cohorts. She got the call to join Varekai the following summer, setting off on the adventure of her life.

THE TWINS: KEVIN & ANDREW ATHERTON
AGE: 26 | HOMETOWN: Manchester, England
ACT: Aerial Straps

Cocky, handsome, skillful and powerful, the Atherton twins are destined to become fan favorites. They have earned a reputation of working hard and playing hard. Much of the twins' training — as well as their personal growth — will depend on their artistic merit. Straps are not an uncommon act at Cirque — and neither are twins. The Atherton's must therefore deliver an aerial act that is bold and cutting-edge, as technically sound as it is innovative. Being merely accomplished performers won't be enough; they must be simultaneously evocative and electrifying. Their challenge lies in being in each other's lives (mentally and physically) on a constant basis.



Varekai is the first time twins Andrew and Kevin Atherton have ever performed together in an act created for the two of them, with their contribution. In fact, the former British gymnastics champions had never worked as a pair before coming to Cirque du Soleil in April 2000—they'd usually been competitors on the sporting stage. Kevin sums it up: "It was miserable when we first started working together. Today, though, I know I'd never do this sort of act with anyone else. We trust each other absolutely, and that's essential for an acrobatic duo."

Of the two (practically) identical twins, Andrew is older by three minutes. When he was recruited to England's junior team in 1989, he travelled for 10 years, participating in some of the biggest gymnastics competitions across the globe. His team took gold at the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, and he returned home with silvers of his own in rings and individual events. Before joining Cirque du Soleil, he tried his hand at a profession requiring an entirely different set of talents—for three months, he worked in a bank! "Yes, I wanted to work as an acrobat," he explains, "but at the same time, I wanted to know what 'normal' life was like."

For his part, Kevin studied to become a sports physiotherapist before joining Varekai. Like his brother, he was a member of Britain's gymnastic elite from 1989 to 1999. The high point of his career was in 1992, when he became British junior champion, but his proudest moment was Andrew's performance at Kuala Lumpur: "I got injured two weeks before the competition and had to withdraw. When my brother carried off those medals, it was as though I'd won them too."

Since an early age, Andrew and Kevin have been the darlings of the British advertising world. In addition to gymnastics training at the National Sports Centre in Shropshire, they both attended many photo and TV commercial shoots. In 2001 alone, they were the faces of an international poster campaign for Mercedes-Benz, and they shared the stage in Tom Stoppard's *On the Razzle*.

OLEG OUCHAKOV

AGE: 36 | HOMETOWN: Siberia, Russia

ACT: Mixed Icarian, Acrobatic Pas de Deux



Oleg has just completed five years of touring with Cirque's Quidam, leaving with dance partner Tatiana for a chance to perform in Varekai. Oleg, raised in Siberia, left home at a young age to join the world of Acrosport competitions and, later, to join traditional circus troupes where his panache, power and penchant for showmanship were quickly noticed. For all his charm and intelligence, Oleg is a walking paradox – he is at once brutish and seductive, a rogue and a scholar. His sober attention to detail made him a favorite of the artistic directors from day one, while his escapades have highlighted many an opening night party. But with Oleg, one thing is certain – a cast without him is infinitely poorer.

Oleg Ouchakov has at least three very good reasons to celebrate being part of the Varekai cast. "In this show, I perform my very own act with my artistic partner Tatiana Gousarova. It's one of my lifelong dreams," explains this native of Magnitogorsk, Russia. What's more, Varekai is the second production he's collaborated in with Cirque du Soleil. It also happens to mark his 10th anniversary as an artistic performer. But long before these achievements, Oleg Ouchakov already had a pretty impressive track record.

From 1986 to 1991, he was part of the international acrosport elite as a member of the former Soviet national team, which dominated this discipline at the time. His athletic triumphs include three first-place finishes at the erstwhile Soviet Cup, and top prize at the 1987 European championships. As a circus performer, he has worked with the Moscow Circus, the traditional Mexican circuses Hermanos Padilla and Hermanos Gasca, and Cirque du Soleil. His travels afforded him the opportunity to broaden his linguistic horizons-in addition to Russian, he speaks fluent English and Spanish. So well, in fact, that he was planning to open a sports school in Costa Rica in 1995. Around the same time, he decided to give the circus world one last chance, sending a video of his acts to Cirque du Soleil's Casting Department-which immediately invited him to help create, then perform in, Quidam.

With Quidam, Oleg toured the world's major cities for over five years. In 1999, he and his fellow Banquine act members won the Clown d'or at the Festival du cirque de Monte-Carlo, one of the world's most prestigious awards for circus artists. In December 2000, Oleg decided to pursue a career as an independent performer, but still kept close ties with Cirque du Soleil. In the spring of 2001, he came to Cirque's training studios to work on an original act with Tatiana Gousarova, a former Quidam colleague.

OLGA PIKHLENKO

AGE: 22 | HOMETOWN: Russia

ACT: Hand-balancing, Lead Character in Varekai



The daughter of Cirque coach Sacha, Olga recently joined Varekai after working on Quidam for five years. She is young, shy, beautiful, and talented. There have been recent concerns about her continued complaints about fatigue and back pain. Olga is looking forward to going on the road again as she has been living on her own for six years. Now, she is adjusting to living with her parents again. She has befriended the other Russian artists, in particular Oleg, with whom she developed a close, sibling-like relationship on Quidam. Ten years ago, Olga Pikhlenko paired up with her father Alexander to win gold at the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain-between that achievement and April 2002, Olga wowed audiences under the big top with the Bolshoi Moscow Circus, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and Cirque du Soleil. She performed with Cirque du Soleil from June 1996 to January 2002 in Quidam with her solo handbalancing on canes act. On her travels, she has dazzled millions of spectators on all five continents.

Olga was born in the Russian city of Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad). A few years ago, her parents settled in the United States. Her artistic journey, however, has made her a true citizen of the world. "For me, 'home' and 'circus' are synonymous," she says. "Cirque du Soleil is my extended family." The comparison is all the more apt, seeing as her father was at her side throughout the creation of Varekai -Alexander Pikhlenko is the Russian swings coach for the show. In fact, Olga owes her gift of balance to him. She began training under his supervision in 1991, after learning rhythmic gymnastics for seven years. Despite her long career under the big top, this is the first time Olga has taken part in a new show at Cirque du Soleil. "After so many years touring with the same act," she confides, "my work became too routine. I love the act of creation. My new act is more difficult than the last one, but I'm not afraid of the risks." Olga created her character in Varekai in close collaboration with director Dominic Champagne and choreographer Michael Montanaro.

ADRIAN BERINDE

ACT: Varekai Singer



Adrian's career started in 1994 when his first album was named Album of the Year in Romania. He is very interested in the creative environment of Cirque du Soleil and looks forward to contributing to the new show.

/// A FIRE IN THE SKY | THE EPISODES

EPISODE 1: "NEW ARRIVALS"

Candidates for the new Cirque du Soleil show begin to arrive in Montreal from around the world. Among those converging on Cirque's sprawling international headquarters are:

Gareth, a British gymnast, at 21 the youngest of those arriving and away from home for the first time;

his performing partner Ashley; Stella, a Toronto gymnast and former member of Canada's Olympic team, trying to make the transition to the world of performance; Raquel, a Brazilian gymnast who misses her boyfriend; and Kevin and Andrew, twin brothers and British champion gymnasts who possess considerable confidence and ambition.



All the new arrivals get a tour of the huge Cirque du Soleil facility, including the studios, set department, and costume department. They also undergo extensive interviews about their past injuries and physical examinations to determine their strength, endurance, and flexibility. Boris, the Head Coach, makes it clear that being "fit" isn't enough. Mental toughness and self-discipline are essential for anyone hoping to succeed in the Cirque du Soleil experience.



Cirque du Soleil prides itself on creative shows that continually offer something new and innovative. In that spirit, Stella and Raquel are introduced to a newly-invented apparatus, the triple trapeze. They face a gigantic challenge as no one is sure how the act will work or what it will be. As for Gareth and Ashley, they must quickly learn the techniques of the Icarian Games act, an almost forgotten art that Cirque du Soleil has decided to showcase. Pedro, one of the world's last specialists in this discipline, arrives from Spain to coach the pair.

Meanwhile, Michel Laprise of the Casting Department has been searching everywhere — so far without luck — for two vocalists for the show. Having auditioned in Montreal and Toronto, he leaves for New York to audition more candidates. He return to Montreal with what he thinks is a likely candidate, but it doesn't pan out. He must now extend his search to Bulgaria...and perhaps even Romania and France.



Through Michel we meet Dominic Champagne, the new show's Director, and Andrew Watson, the Director of Creation. As the episode unfolds we begin to learn about our characters' stories: the Twins' frank ambition; Stella and Rachel's first encounter with the bizarre and complex triple trapeze; and Gareth's emotional difficulties being away from his beloved

'Mum', who is battling cancer back home in North London.

Gareth's problems are making it difficult for him to eat or sleep properly and, because of that, he is missing classes and struggling to be physically and mentally strong enough to deal with the demands of the work. By the end of the episode his coach has given him an ultimatum: bear down or leave the show.

EPISODE 2: "BEHIND CLOSED DOORS"

The performers in Cirque du Soleil Fire Within have now been hard at work for a month. Each week the number of artists for the new show is growing. Most recently, six Russians have joined the cast. Among them is Oleg, a veteran circus acrobat and, at 35, the oldest member of the entire troupe. Meanwhile, Gareth is having trouble concentrating. He turns up late for training sessions and worries



constantly about affairs back home in England. He thinks he is abandoning his family responsibilities and feels guilty about not being with his mother as she battles cancer.

Michel's search for vocalists continues. Now he is off to Sofia, Bulgaria, followed by Paris for further auditions. At Montreal headquarters, all the performers experience an intense workshop process with the new show's director, Dominic Champagne.



We follow the characters outside of their Cirque du Soleil working environment: Stella cuts loose with a stirring rendition of 'Love Shack' at a karaoke bar, and while Oleg makes living arrangements in Montreal, he confides that he's been more or less "on the road" since 1993 with various shows, including Quidam. While struggling to make the transition from acrobat to dancer, he is exhilarated by this new experience, finding the environment full of possibilities.

Gareth's trainers continue to put pressure on him to work harder and with more commitment. Overwhelmed by Cirque du Soleil and deeply distressed by his mother's cancer, he decides to go home to England for a while to think things over.

EPISODE 3: "THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TRAPEZE"

As we discover quickly enough, there is incredible stress and intensity making a world-class show in a limited time. The drama begins with the much anticipated first "presentation" to Guy Laliberté, the founder of Cirque du Soleil but also the very critical creative guide for all productions. The artists are all nervous, knowing Guy's reaction will determine, which acts stay and which go. Stella and Raquel's triple trapeze act does not get Guy's approval. Sensing that the trapeze structure is too confining and wastes the potential of the six young women, Guy requests a major overhaul. Raquel is prepared to move forward, Stella feels betrayed and unsure. In another shake-up, Andrew Watson asks hip-hop choreographer Bill Shannon to choreograph the Twins' act, in an attempt to break their perceived 'classical' straps look.



More surprises arrive: Gareth shocks everyone, including himself apparently, by returning to Cirque du Soleil. He explains that if he stayed in North London he would probably end up in prison, since "that's what often happens to people in my neighborhood". Raquel is overjoyed when, after two and a half months, her boyfriend Ricardo arrives from Brazil.



While the Twins do not exactly take to Bill or his direction, when they perform a version of their act for the troupe, it's a big hit. Like it or not, they're going to have to keep working with Bill. No such luck for Stella and Raquel. After a private run-through of their revised act for Guy, he is still not satisfied, and takes the structure, and their act, out of the show completely. The girls are crushed.

EPISODE 4: "SHOOTING STARS"

It has been three weeks since Guy Laliberté made major changes to the show and only now are things getting back to normal. Stella and Raquel's act was removed. They now sit on the sidelines, currently with no part in the show. For everyone else, however, deadlines loom. It is only four months to the world premiere and an enormous amount of work still needs to be done, including decisions about make-up, costumes, and set design. The performers need to settle into their new identities.



The Business Affairs Department must present contracts to all the performers for three-year deals, the duration of the tour. The Twins initially question certain clauses in the contract but eventually decide they cannot miss this opportunity to be part of Cirque du Soleil, and sign on the dotted line.



The Marketing Department must also finalize a name for the show. Brand Director Louise Mercier presents many possibilities, but show Director Dominic Champagne does not take to any of them. Many meetings to figure out a title ensue. Guy chooses the Twins as the icon to grace the annual Cirque du Soleil Christmas card; it is their first taste of stardom.

Finally, some good news for Stella and Raquel, they have been given a new act to do on the triple trapeze. However, they have to start their act from the beginning, and have a lot of work to catch up on. They are months behind the others. This race against time adds much pressure, especially on Stella, who has limited experience on this apparatus. Gareth and Ashley, meanwhile, are working hard on their number. Gareth is now determined to earn a place in the show. In fact, he does so, signs his contract and, like the 40 other performers, has over 60 of his measurements taken and his head cast made.

With the Christmas break only a week away, Louise has narrowed the name of the show down to two choices. Dominic selects one and this production, nameless for months, now becomes, at last... Varekai!

EPISODE 5: "CHRISTMAS"

Before everyone departs in all directions to celebrate the holiday season, Dominic Champagne unveils the name of the show to the artists. Taken from the Romany language and reflecting gypsy culture, Varekai means "wherever", evoking the idea of a convergence of origins, characteristics and talents coming together from around the world to create something magical and unique. Like gypsies, artists and performers often survive without a country, without a home, and often without roots, but wherever they once came from, they are now part of a social culture that defines and identifies them.



Ashley is expecting a special present this Christmas, his girlfriend Sara is coming to Montreal. He is both excited and concerned about her visit, as he ponders how he will handle the balancing act between his work with the Cirque du Soleil and his relationship with her, especially if he must go on tour for several years.

Meanwhile in London, England, the holiday season is just work as usual for Olga Pikhienko, a world-renowned equilibrist, on the stage of Quidam. After five years of performing and touring with Quidam, beginning when she was 15 years old, Cirque du Soleil is now offering Olga a starring role in Varekai. When she arrives in Montreal, Olga will be reunited with her father Sacha, who is her coach and trainer, and is also one of the coaches for Varekai. Olga is nervous about meeting new people after being with the Quidam troupe for so many years.



With everyone leaving for the holidays, artist scout Michel Laprise makes one more pitch to Director Dominic Champagne, hoping that he has finally found a singer that will meet his high expectations. Adrian Berinde, a singer from Romania impresses Dominic and is in the show.

None of the performers have family in Montreal with whom to celebrate the holidays. The twins, Kevin and Andrew fly off to Las Vegas to celebrate the New Year. Stella heads back to Toronto to visit her family. Oleg reflects on his father and his daughter back in Russia, neither of whom he has seen in a long time. Gareth has a phone conversation with his ailing mother back in North London. Cirque du Soleil choreographer Michael Montanaro invites the remaining artists to a party at his house where they toast 'their artistic family'.

The New Year will bring some new faces to Cirque du Soleil and some new realities for the performers. Some artists may feel threatened by the new players. With set construction underway and the final new acts arriving, Dominic's staging of Varekai finally begins.

EPISODE 6: "NEW BLOOD"

It is early January and, now that the acrobatic part of the show is falling into place, Dominic Champagne begins to work with the artists on their stage identities. The performers in Varekai must also become actors, and learn to play their characters.



As everyone is thrust into the final stretch before the premiere of Varekai, the final group of new performers arrive in Montreal and are officially introduced to the team. They include the long-awaited singer from Romania, Adrian Berinde, and three remarkable Spanish brothers, the Rampins, longtime experts in the Icarian Games act, the same technique Gareth & Ashley have been struggling to learn. These new arrivals can afford to join rehearsals so late because they are all well established and accomplished performers. Something that intimidates some of the less experienced artists.

Ashley and Gareth began learning the Icarian Games act from scratch five months ago, but now they must share the stage with some of the best performers in the world. Feeling the heat from the world-renowned brothers, Gareth and Ashley quickly intensify their training routine, leaving Ashley's girlfriend Sara on the sidelines.

Although she is supportive of Ashley's aspirations under the big top, Sara often feels demoralized and finds it hard to stay positive as she waits for his return every night at the performers' residence. Gareth and Ashley slowly begin to exchange comments and ideas with the Rampins. There is a lot of goodwill on both sides, and they will all need it, especially for their upcoming performance evaluation in front of Guy Laliberté.

After meeting with the show's musical composer, Violaine Corradi, Adrian begins to learn the music to which he will sing for his Cirque du Soleil debut. In Romania, Adrian is a well-known, respected artist with several CDs to his credit. In Montreal he is a performer like all the others, a new reality that he has to adjust to. Like the acrobats, he too is being asked to push his range, perhaps a little too far for his initial liking.



The coaches anticipate great things for Olga, considered one of the world's greatest contortionists. She began her career at the age of six, as a gymnast in Russia. From the start, her father Sacha has been her principal trainer and coach. Olga's technique is impeccable, but Dominic wants to push her emotional range. He introduces her to her costume and tells

her how her character fits into the show. Olga is having adjustment problems, coaches have noticed that she is too often tired and distracted and have concerns about her eating habits. Her father is not impressed by her lack of focus and enthusiasm about her starring role in the new show. Everyone agrees there is no alternative, Olga must change her habits.

Tickets have now gone on sale for Varekai, there is no turning back. Everyone is on edge as the artists gear up for their second presentation to Guy Laliberté. He delivers his verdict to the coaches, "it's going to be a long winter..."

EPISODE 7: "PUSHING ACROBATICS"

The opening of Varekai is less than two months away and the show is far from ready.

Everyone is facing tight deadlines and pressures. Raquel and Stella's triple trapeze act is yet to be approved, and they are told they need to achieve more physicality, more sensuality...and more speed. Oleg is frustrated with his gymnastic routine work, while Louise in Marketing rushes to present draft show visual creations to Cirque du Soleil owner Guy Laliberté, before he departs Montreal for a month. The people in the props, makeup, and costume departments are all working overtime, this is taking its toll on everyone.



The creative team of Varekai calls a meeting of the entire cast, time is running out, even more discipline and commitment are needed from everyone.



Oleg takes a small break, going to the hair salon and returning to training invigorated. The triple trapeze gymnasts, agree to work on a more exciting routine, and fast. Louise and the Marketing Team are stunned when Guy rejects all the show visual ideas and suggests using images from an underwater photo shoot with Anton and Olga.

EPISODE 8: "MOVING ON"

With the opening of Varekai only a few weeks away, it is almost time for another stressful cast presentation to Cirque du Soleil owner Guy Laliberté.

The show visual is still unresolved, as it has not met the requirements of the creative team. Also, the underwater image the Marketing Team hoped to use is not appropriate.



The presentation to Guy appears to go well for many of the performers: Gareth & Ashley perform their Icarian Games act for the first time without a spotter and it goes off without a hitch. Stella, Raquel and the triple trapeze team make a good impression with their new routine and are told they will be part of the show.

Oleg and Tatiana's dance act brings cheers.

Everyone celebrates surviving Guy's demanding eye: Stella and Raquel join all the Spanish-speaking members of the group for a festive restaurant dinner, while Ashley throws a birthday party for Gareth at home. Gareth receives an incredible birthday gift; his mother, sister and baby nephew have come from England to visit. Nevertheless, it's a temporary respite. Construction on the mammoth Grand Chapiteau is underway, and the stage manager calls a meeting with the cast to tell them about the next hurdle in the mounting of the show, rehearsing and performing on the show's actual stage. This will add two hours to their already long day.



Meanwhile, we learn that Pedro is unhappy with the inconsistency being shown in Gareth and Ashley's performances. The coach feels they need to turn up the intensity a few notches. Gareth is stressed out. He says he has never worked this hard in his life, this is not his lifestyle, and confides to his mother that he is having trouble sleeping.

There is still an impasse over agreeing on the show visual and design. Lyn Heward, President & COO of the Creative Content Division, joins the meeting to see if she can help resolve the matter. Lyn reviews an early design that was discarded long ago. Remarkably, this image is now chosen.

Tomorrow is a big day for everyone, they are moving into the Grand Chapiteau.

EPISODE 9: "THE GRAND CHAPITEAU"

It is the first day for everyone under the Grand Chapiteau, the place the whole troupe will call home for the next three years.

The twins, Andrew and Kevin, are excited to finally move into the bigger facility of the Grand Chapiteau. Gareth and Ashley are moving here too, but with a warning, their performance is unacceptable. If they do not improve, there will be serious consequences. They discuss their problems with the coaches, trying to figure out what is wrong and how to fix it.



Some good news for Louise, after many rejected designs, Guy Laliberté has approved the latest show visual in time for the opening press conference three days away. Several of the show's performers will appear at this press conference to give the media a preview of opening night.

It is only three weeks to opening night. The performers adapt to their costumes and makeup. Dominic Champagne begins the final visual touches to the show, now that they are rehearsing on the real stage. He incorporates the singers into the on-stage action of the other performers.

After a week under the Grand Chapiteau, the company has a day off. Ashley, exhausted, sleeps, even though his girlfriend would like to spend some time with him. Raquel and her boyfriend Ricardo move into their own place together, away from their fellow performers. Gareth relieves his stress by going fishing in the St. Lawrence River.



Returning to Cirque, Gareth and Ashley, try to improve on their act, though their performance is still short of what is expected. The big question for Varekai's creative team right now is whether to include their act in the press conference presentation. The decision becomes moot when Ashley falls ill the day before.

At the press conference over 250 media including: print journalists, still photographers, TV cameras and radio interviewers, listen to Guy's welcome and introduction and then settle back to enjoy a preview of the show.

EPISODE 10: "THE LION'S DEN"

Varekai artwork appears throughout Montreal on the sides of buses — this is the launch of the first new Cirque du Soleil show in three years. It is only two weeks before opening night and a preview is scheduled for Cirque owner Guy Laliberté and 500 Cirque insiders. This traditional, invitation-only run of the show



is nicknamed "The Lion's Den." Everyone is nervous; the artists feel the pressure of performing in front of a friendly but critical audience. One performer who is particularly anxious is the show's singer, Adrian. This will also be Adrian's first performance in front of Guy and the creative team. Gareth and Ashley have received some disappointing news, their Icarian act will not be included in the show; their performance is just too inconsistent. The more experienced Spanish Icarians will perform alone. Reduced to supporting roles in Varekai, Gareth and Ashley's disappointment is palpable.

Guy arrives, not having seen any of the performances for two months. The hundreds of invited guests fill the Grand Chapiteau. The "Lion's Den" begins and Dominic's artistic vision comes to the fore, tying together the performers' acrobatic feats to achieve what will hopefully be magical. After the evening's performance, Guy meets privately with Dominic and the show's creators and coaches and Guy does not hold back. Tomorrow the news will be delivered to the performers and some of it may be devastating.

The next morning, Oleg and Tatiana are told their act will not be included in the premiere. Adrian, the singer, is fired. After 100 days of work and rehearsal, he packs his bags for home.

Guy dispatches Michel on an urgent mission; he must find a new and spectacular act within 72 hours. Michel works the phones, calling all over the world to find the right addition. Guy has also tells Boris and the other coaches that a daunting amount of work remains and he questions where certain acts are going.



Everyone is working 15-hour days and private lives have been put on hold. Oleg is unhappy about losing his dance duet with Tatiana and also realizes he has not spoken to his daughter, whose birthday is approaching, in nearly seven months. Michel has found his new act, a remarkable Mexican juggler. As the juggler arrives, Michel heads off to say goodbye to Adrian, who expresses his deep disappointment at being fired. As he gets ready to fly back to Transylvania, a new singer, Mathieu, has already arrived to take his place...

EPISODE 11: "COUNTDOWN TO PREMIERE"

Cirque owner Guy Laliberté has just seen the first full run-through of Varekai and he's not happy. Changes are made quickly: singer Adrian Barinde is fired; Ashley and Gareth are dismissed from the Icarian Games act, but continue to play supporting roles; and Oleg and Tatiana's act is on hold. Immediately, talent scout Michel Laprise brings in new



performers from Italy. The new arrivals, the Stevens Brothers, will replace Gareth and Ashley in the Icarian Games. Without a minute to spare, they must be integrated into the show before tomorrow's dress rehearsal. The Stevens Brothers arrive on site and are embraced by the Rampins. It's the first time that these top Icarian teams share the stage. Olga is one of the world's most talented contortionists, but she's having trouble as a lead in Varekai. At age 22, Olga has performed for over fifteen years, almost all of it with her father by her side. He struggles to balance the feelings of a father with the discipline of a coach. As the rest of the performers rehearse, Oleg can only sit on the sidelines and hope for a reprieve. After hours of work the cast is still trapped under the big top. The performers are exhausted and there are technical problems. Dominique has less than 48 hours to bring everything together for opening night.

It's the last dress rehearsal for Varekai. Those whom remain have just tonight to prove that they deserve to be on stage opening night. Kevin and Andrew slip away to meet their families who have arrived from England to see the boys appear in their first Cirque du Soleil show. While their families head back to the hotel, Kevin and Andrew head to the big top, the dress rehearsal only two hours away.

Raquel's boyfriend Ricardo arrives with hundreds of invited guests to be part of the test audience for the dress rehearsal. Despite her last minute jitters, Olga is finally getting comfortable with her role. Oleg has to warm up too — he's just received word that his act with Tatiana is back in the show.



This dress rehearsal is the performers' last chance to get things right. However, with a live audience in the mix, many performers find it hard to focus. It's a tough night and Olga's performance is one of the few that is flawless. Directors Dominic and Andrew meet with owner Guy Laliberté. At this late hour, they have no choice but to rely on the traditional Cirque saying, "bad dress rehearsal, great opening night." The crowd leaves, the mess from the dress rehearsal is cleared away, and hopefully tomorrow, it will go better under the big top. Opening night is 24 hours away.

EPISODE 12: "OPENING NIGHT"

Today is the world premiere of Varekai. As they head back to the big top, performers try to forget last night's shaky dress rehearsal. Final touches are made so that everything is perfect for the main event. In two hours, journalists and photographers will be the first to see Cirque du Soleil's latest show. As the artists prepare to give the audience everything they have, Guy Laliberté welcomes the crowd.



The moment of truth has arrived: the world premiere of Varekai has begun. Gareth is first on stage. His in-your-face performance helps break the ice with the audience. Still trying to put the errors of the dress rehearsal behind them, Kevin and Andrew head out to perform. Despite the pressure, they soar through their act, bringing the audience to their feet. Backstage, Ashley watches the Rampin and Stevens Brothers' perform the act he was supposed to do. For Olga, this night is the culmination of years of work. As she steps onto the stage, she realizes that her dream has come true and gives it her all.

The premiere passes the halfway point, and the show has been close to flawless. Stella, Raquel, and their teammates gear up for the triple trapeze act. Months of determination and hard work pay off, as the girls put on a breathtaking performance. Oleg takes the stage with Tatiana. As they flow through their routine, Tatiana falls. Yet they carry on and deliver a beautiful and courageous performance. The show is a resounding success and the performers receive a standing ovation. The cast heads backstage to celebrate with director Dominic Champagne and ecstatic Cirque owner, Guy Laliberté. Even the stars are overjoyed: actress Mila Jovovich congratulates Olga. A long night of celebration begins for the triumphant opening of Varekai.

EPISODE 13: "AFTERMATH & DEPARTURE"



On opening night, months of grueling work finally paid off: Varekai is a hit and owner Guy Laliberté is happy. For six weeks, Varekai plays to sold out crowds and gushing reviews. Now it's onto the next stage: leaving Montreal for a three-year North American tour.

At Cirque du Soleil headquarters, the performers are prepped for their new lives on the road. Varekai will join the seven other productions playing Europe, Asia and the United States. Tonight, Varekai runs for the 64th and final time in Montreal. But two people are missing from the warm up: Gareth and Ashley. After a meeting at Cirque headquarters, their contracts have been terminated. Artistic director Nicolette Naum shares the news with the Varekai family. After almost a year of struggling through training, Ashley and Gareth will not get the payoff, the excitement and the applause that come with the tour. The cast is shaken, but the show must go on.

The final performance in Montreal has to be special. Gareth's lizard has opened the show every night and has become a Varekai favorite. Tonight is his last chance to touch the crowd, and he gives it everything. As a spotter for the Triple Trapeze act, Ashley heads for the stage one last time.

The last show in Montreal is over. For many, it's the end of one of the toughest periods in their lives. For Gareth and Ashley, it's the end of a dream. Ashley's girlfriend Sara is also devastated, as her life has been turned upside down as well. Director Dominic Champagne and the coaches bid them goodbye and thank them for their contribution to Varekai's success in Montreal.

The Varekai touring show prepares to leave for Quebec City, but moving on is not an easy task for the performers. Having spent almost a decade touring for the Cirque, Olga knows the life well. But no matter how many times she hits the road, it's still hard to leave her parents behind. After nine months of sedentary life, Oleg is back on tour. Stella's boyfriend Sam is driving her to Quebec City, but he'll stay only a few days. Raquel's boyfriend Ricardo will join her on the road. For them, the tour is a chance to travel the world together. Their adventure begins with a boat trip to Quebec City, a pre-honeymoon cruise, as they will get married at the second stop on the Varekai tour.

The performers are now on the road, as they will be for the next three years. Soon Gareth will be back to his old life in London. He leaves Montreal, and this time, there's no coming back. At the Cirque du Soleil headquarters, Ashley returns to where it all began. Cirque has invited him to join the hundreds of other candidates to audition for the next show...

/// A FLY ON THE WALL | BEHIND THE SCENES

Over the years, there has been growing public and media interest in learning more about the creative process behind a Cirque du Soleil show. Given the wealth of content possibilities, a series format would provide ample opportunities to present another side of Cirque du Soleil to television audiences: one revealing the creative process in more detail, the other, the human side of the process, revealing the ups and downs of the character's personal lives. As a result Galafilm joined Cirque du Soleil Images in a partnership to co-produce the 13-episode series based on "life at Cirque du Soleil," using the opportune timing of the creation of the new live show, Varekai, as its backdrop.

The degree of emphasis on each character varied as the storylines were constantly developing. Research was therefore ongoing with a continual search for new potential characters as well. It was also necessary to research the lives of selected characters in great detail to ensure that their story remained alive and properly depicted. It was possible for minor characters to become main characters and vice versa depending on their involvement in the show and how their stories took shape compared to other storylines.

To film the series, there was one main crew, led by Series Director Lewis Cohen who shot the majority of footage. It was necessary, however, to use a second crew, led by Director Bachir Bensaddek, when there was a lot of activity happening at once. Both directors required access to the personal lives of each character. With this came the need for trust. It was also necessary to maintain invisibility to enable the characters to be as natural as possible. "Filming the characters involved building relationships with them, entering into their world, getting to know their friends, their hopes and their patterns," says Series Director Lewis Cohen.

With in excess of 1000 hours of footage, the process of editing has proven to be a mammoth task for the post-production team. These 60,000 minutes of logged footage were sifted through by the story editor, editors and series director to begin the task of piecing together the storylines for each character for each episode. Due to the massive amounts of footage, each episode took nine weeks to complete. Lewis Cohen, Series Director, states "Every episode has a theme that is balanced within the series. Each episode is a short film in itself, it has a beginning, a middle and an end; it is a complete package that also follows up stories from the previous episode and opens up or continues stories for the next episode."

Q. Mr. Cohen, what was your role in choosing the characters?

A. I helped choose the characters with the producers and our researcher. I was looking for emotion, humor, talent, diversity, ambition, fear and charm. People who would heighten the dramatic charge, and also represent an interesting cross-section of the cultures that make up Varekai; most importantly, people who interested me and I could care about.

Q. How did you find the starting point for filming?

A. The shooting period was built around the arrival and departure of the performers, who were our main characters. We began as their planes landed from England, Brazil, Romania, and so on. We finally ended our year-long shoot as the big top was dismantled to go on the road.

Q. How did you keep the stories evolving and capture them on film?

A. I never had to force the stories to evolve; stories are just there in every human life. We had to build trust to have access. We also had to keep our ears open for the little details that would clue us into their stories; snippets of conversation, the look on someone's face, and so on. There is also the art of being at the right place at the right time (with a soundman and cameraman in tow), which is not always obvious or easy. We got the hang of it, though. I also used my own camera without a soundman for delicate situations or when we didn't have time to alert the crew.

Q. How did the characters feel having the crew involved in their day-to-day lives?

A. In many cases, we became close to the characters. For some of them, having the crew around was like seeing friends. Going over to the apartments after an absence of a week, they would ask where we've been and why we hadn't been around. Other times, when the characters were going through tough, emotional challenges, I'm sure at first they felt slightly ill at ease, but as we got to know them we became good listeners and I hope were of some help.

Q. Were there any times when the characters refused to be filmed?

A. Yes, people refused to be filmed. On a handful of occasions our characters were just too emotionally fatigued. In the case of Cirque du Soleil, we tried to have as much access as possible, because we wanted both sides of every story. But you have to earn the trust of the Cirque culture, one person at a time, and you just try to do that and build some good feeling and momentum. Pushing too hard is counterproductive, but so is always taking no for an answer. In the case of personal stories, 'no' means 'no', it was part of the deal. It did happen, maybe two or three times, and you have to accept the person's limits.

Q. What were the major filming/directing challenges?

A. The first challenge was to jump into a totally new world of individuals and of Cirque du Soleil in general, and get a handle on it quickly. The biggest challenge, though, has been to carve a year's worth of film and tape into an exciting and coherent journey with a dozen people in thirteen chapters. It's a huge undertaking and a wonderful opportunity.

Q. What did you enjoy most about this experience?

A. I've enjoyed so many things - meeting extraordinary people, being exposed to Cirque du Soleil, telling people's stories, exploring new visual ideas, observing the workings of a fascinating company, and witnessing the process of creation, both Varekai's and ours.

And how did Andrew and Kevin Atherton feel about being filmed all the time?

Kevin's experience:

Having the camera crew following us around all the time was a little unusual at first. I personally was very self-conscious for the first few weeks. However, as time went on it became easier to forget about them being there, and to go about your daily business as if they weren't there. They were also very professional people. If they at any moment felt that they were invading your personal space, or you just simply wanted time alone, they would respect that and film elsewhere. The most enjoyable moment of this experience is to look back more than twelve months later to see where we all began. The show is great, and is getting better with each city we visit. We all went through some tough moments during the show's creation, which people will see when they watch the series. Looking back though makes you realize that it was all worth it. The biggest challenge during the filming of "Fire Within" was to watch the big disappointments that occurred with some of the artists.

Andrew's thoughts:

I did not really have any problems with the camera following me. At first, I just thought it was strange the way others looked at you, wondering whether you were some famous pop star or actor. It was a good feeling. The thing that I enjoyed the most about having the crew there was knowing that I would have a documented account of a stage in my life. Going through a whole creation process is something that is very special and not many people can say that they have done that. Now I have something that I will be able to look at in years to come and hopefully show my grandchildren. I'm very proud to have been a part of something like this. The biggest challenge for me was to be very careful with what I said and did. I have had experience with the media before and I am fully aware that they can manipulate certain situations. For the most part, though, this has not happened.

/// RESOLUTION

Fire Within was a groundbreaking series allowing fans unprecedented access to Cirque du Soleil. It allowed us to go deep inside the company's creation process and witness the magic in the making. Fire Within also allowed us to see the human side of the Cirque. The series' raw and honest portrayal of the performers and staff showed us a side of the company that we'd never been able to see before.

The series' frank and candid approach was riveting. It shattered the illusion that the people at Cirque du Soleil are somehow super-human. The creation of Varekai serves only as a back-drop, the real focus was on the performers' human drama.

The series followed their struggles, their challenges, their triumphs, and their lives, and told their stories in an honest and surprisingly personal manner. Over the course of the series we followed Oleg (Acrobatic Pas de Deux), Stella (Triple Trapeze), Olga (Hand-balancing on Canes), Raquel (Triple Trapeze), Ashley and Gareth (Icarian Games), Kevin and Andrew (Aerial Straps). We found out that they deal with everyday issues like all of us. Everything doesn't always go perfectly at Cirque and this series didn't shy away from showing us the grittier side of the company that we've never seen before.

Each episode weaved several storylines together around a central theme, and frames them with creative editing and an eclectic and evocative soundtrack. The series was not without its weaknesses. *Fire Within* focused very heavily on some characters while only showing momentary glimpses of others. According to the Cirque website, over 1000 hours of raw footage were filmed for *Fire Within* and each of the thirteen episodes took nine weeks to edit. The hard work is evident in the quality of the finished product; a series that is as respectful as it is informative, insightful and honest. The *Fire Within* series as a whole is a monumental achievement for Cirque du Soleil.

Admittedly, watching *Fire Within* does take some of the mystique and mystery out of watching *Varekai* live. I now see the performers as actual people and not the fantastic super-creatures and magical characters portrayed on stage. In a way, I now see through the illusion. But on the other hand I have a profound respect and much deeper appreciation of the artists because I've witnessed the grueling work and immense challenges that these extraordinary individuals had to overcome to become part of a Cirque du Soleil production.



ZUMANITY™

The Sensual Side of
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL®

ZUMANITY

Zumanity [zū'man-eh-tee] is described as "an intense visit to a world where human inhibitions are both unveiled and discarded, where style and intense sensual passion share an uncommon stage." Cirque recently offered this definition of the word: "n. n. Neologism dating from 2003, contraction of the words "zoo" and "humanity." 1. A human zoo. 2. A new form of eroticism which blends dance movement, acrobatics and beautiful bodies with the sensual caress of the human voice and the pulse of exotic rhythms. 3. An exploration that awakens the most primal urges in human beings."

Zumanity is a stunning exploration of the hidden forces behind desire, and a celebration of human diversity. It's sensual, sexual, and in your face. This show will awaken the most primal urges of generations x, y and z to a new form of eroticism, which lends dance movement, skillful acrobatics and beautiful bodies of many shapes and sizes with the sensual caress of the human voice and the pulsation of exotic rhythms and sultry tones. Sexuality, a touchy subject for many, is comprised of many things: romanticism, sensuality, love, friendship, and brotherhood. Zumanity celebrates all of those things, to shatter the stereotypes of what is beautiful, to be more accepting of differences in human sexuality. Zumanity is a show for lovers, would-be lovers and those simply fascinated by love. Don't be intimidated - come, sit back... relax. Enjoy yourself. Open your mind and your soul and let your senses feast on this Garden of Delights.

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	July 31, 2003 (Previews) September 20, 2003 (Gala)
Type:	Resident / Theater
Director:	Dominic Champagne René Richard Cyr
Composer:	Simon Carpentier
Location:	NY-NY, Las Vegas

Creative Team

Guide	Lighting Designer
Guy Laliberté	Luc Lafortune
Writer/Director	Sound Designer
Dominic Champagne	Jonathan Deans
Writer/Director	Comedic Director
René Richard Cyr	Cal McCrystal
Creation	Projection
Andrew Watson	Natcha Merritt
Costumes	Makeup Designer
Thierry Mugler	Nathalie Gagné
Set Designer	Acro Rigging
Stéphane Roy	Jaque Paquin
Composer	Props Designer
Simon Carpentier	Normand Blais
Choreographer	Additional Music
Debra Brown	Ana Liani
Choreographer	
Marguerite Derricks	

/// FOUR FLOWERS, ONE DESERT

Cirque du Soleil planted what it called a “Flower in the Desert” with *Mystère* in 1993, and then nurtured its newly-formed garden into bloom with the launch of “O” in 1998 to enormous success. Rather than siphon sales from *Mystère*, “O” ended up complimenting the original production, elevating both to the status of sales juggernauts. Upsetting that delicate balance was neither in Cirque’s best interests nor on the forefront of their minds. But when their partner – Mirage Resorts – merged with MGM Grand in May 2000 and Wynn’s Mirage, Treasure Island, and Bellagio resorts joined MGM Grand Inc.’s New York-New York and MGM Grand casino-resorts, speculation ran rampant that Cirque du Soleil would extend its resident show empire in Las Vegas to the showrooms in each of these casino-hotels. When and where, however, was a mystery, but by the spring of 2002, those rumors became a little more persistent.

Cirque fans considered that *Mystère* might fold at Treasure Island and another Cirque show – *Alegría* – would take its place (*Mystère* was approaching the end of its initial 10-year contract), but other gossip suggested that *Mystère* would stay indefinitely and a third, different show, would make an appearance instead. Whether this show would be one already in the Cirque du Soleil repertoire or a brand new creation was at the time unknown. During March 2002 the Las Vegas Review-Journal suggested the second option was the more plausible possibility and reported that the management of the New York-New York casino-hotel had been actively courting Cirque du Soleil founder and President Guy Laliberté to set up something at their property.

Indeed, in an article published earlier, on December 4, 2001, Alan Feldman (Vice President of Public Affairs for MGM Mirage) confirmed that the New York-New York casino hotel would be the number one choice for the next Cirque show in Las Vegas. But where would it go? According to the article Cirque could set up a big top on property (think *Nouvelle Experience* in 1993 at The Mirage) until a suitable theater could be built for the show. Or, a show might move in to the Broadway Theater, which was then occupied by “Michael Flatley’s *Lord of the Dance*.” Options were open and all bets were on the table. Would it happen?

Speculation regarding a new Las Vegas production would not abate. In fact when Cirque posted a casting call the following month (April 2002) for “a new project”, it only stoked the rumor mill’s fire. In their words, “Cirque du Soleil is now developing a new form of Cabaret-style show” and they were looking for a variety of talents to help bring this project into reality. They wanted artists that “wish to perform in a provocative, sensual, exotic and cutting-edge environment.” The only thing that Cirque du Soleil would say regarding where this new show would be was that it would be “staged at a permanent venue within the North American continent” but fell short of suggesting it would be in Las Vegas... so the rumor mill kept turning.

By June 2002 rumors were abound that Las Vegas would not receive just one new show, but possibly two! And then in July 2002 Cirque du Soleil made an announcement... Using the words “a partnership based on creativity and innovation,” Cirque du Soleil in a press release, confirmed earlier rumors and released exciting new official details regarding this project – confirming the Cabaret show concept, as well as a second new show to set up shop at the MGM Grand:

"This partnership is built on the mutual success achieved by our two businesses throughout the past decade," said J. Terrence Lanni, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of MGM MIRAGE.

"Cirque du Soleil proved that it had an excellent understanding of Las Vegas by fundamentally changing the form of entertainment here with their groundbreaking artistic vision first with *Mystère* and then with *'O'*. Now we want to work together to explore new areas in which they can continue to cultivate their unique creativity not only in Las Vegas but throughout our projects in the U.S. and around the world."

Guy Laliberté, President, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Cirque du Soleil, added that, "MGM MIRAGE has an excellent grasp of the creative strengths and energy that drive Cirque du Soleil. We have always held fast to our dream of reinventing other forms of entertainment. Terry Lanni and his team have confidence in us and are assisting us to do so."

"We have set out to stimulate the imagination, fire the senses and touch the emotions of spectators around the world," says Laliberté.

"The potential of Las Vegas is still vast. Some 36 million people visit the city each year and we believe there is room for continued growth to encourage them to take the opportunity to see shows as part of their Las Vegas experience."

The new productions that Cirque du Soleil is preparing could be described as "hybrid" in the sense that they draw on a number of disciplines. "Whatever the creative niche we're developing may be, we are committed to maintaining the level of quality and creativity associated with the Cirque du Soleil brand," says Lyn Heward, President and Chief Operating Officer of the Creative Content Division.

Cirque du Soleil has always put creativity at the heart of all its production and management activities. Creativity is the very essence of Cirque. "We have worked with creators from all over the world to design, produce and stage our shows," explained Guy Laliberté. "We will continue to promote the developing talent of new creators by undertaking new collaborative projects."

The first project, at New York-New York was set to open in 2003 under the direction of Philippe Decouflé, with Andrew Watson serving as Director of Creation. While the theme and disciplines therein were still in development, the show was said to be "sensual, exotic and provocative;" containing elements of dance, acrobatics and, of course, humor. This show would take the place of "Michael Flatley's Lord of the Dance". The Second project, for the MGM Grand, would replace "EFX Alive!" starring Rick Springfield, and would open in 2004 - Cirque du Soleil's 20th Anniversary year. Robert Lepage was set as director with Guy Caron (*Le Magie Continue*, *Dralion*) serving as Director of Creation. The show was set to "shake the spectator's perception of space, conception of the law of gravity, and comprehension of the world in three dimensions." By the end of 2002 speculation ran wild regarding just what Cirque du Soleil had up its sleeve; casting calls became rare windows into just what the company had in mind. Some small details began to emerge about the performances/acts. Slated to debut in July 2003, the New York-New York show was casting Rhythmic Gymnasts (to perform in a duo act), a Contortionist / Hand-balancer (for a specialty act - solo, duo, trio or quartet), a Middle Eastern dancer (for an exotic dance act), and "virile" male and "voluptuous" female dancers.

/// AN INTIMATE EXPRESSION

On Sunday, July 28, 2002, "Michael Flatley's Lord of the Dance" ended its successful four-year run at the Broadway Theater in the New York-New York Hotel and Casino, paving the way for the new Cirque du Soleil show to claim its space. Throughout the summer Cirque fans had been having heated debates over the direction the new "cabaret-style" show would be taking (Fascination maintained that while most felt that "cabaret" must mean topless, that was not necessarily the case). By September 2002, several signs posted around and inside the hotel gave more of a clue. The largest by far was attached to a parking structure on Tropicana Avenue, measuring a whopping 50 X 60 feet! All of the signs said the same thing:

"Opening / July 2003 / a more / INTIMATE expression of / Cirque du Soleil / at New York-New York" (The word "intimate" in larger type than the rest of that line, showing emphasis.)

What made these signs interesting wasn't just the "more intimate expression" tagline. The image in the center of the picture was somewhat hazy and mysterious, but further inspection revealed it to be a nude woman's torso, turned slightly to her left. The camera angle was based below the right hip, aiming upwards. Her left breast was visible, though the nipple had been airbrushed out. The right breast had been airbrushed entirely and was further obscured by the word "Opening." Her navel was clearly visible in the lower right. The bottom of the shot was cropped several inches below that on her body - any further down and you'd be in trouble! Regardless, fans had been speculating about the show's name and theme for months. The fervor spiked on the evening of March 17th when an article appeared in USA Today featuring the would-be title of the show, amongst a list of the gifts handed out to presenters at the Academy Awards that year. The gift was an "invitation for two to the international gala premiere of Zumanity ... on Sept. 20 and a two-night stay at the [New York-New York Hotel Casino]."

Zumanity [zü'man-i-tee] was described as "an intense visit to a world where human inhibitions are both unveiled and discarded, where style and intense sensual passion share an uncommon stage." With the cat out of the bag, Cirque offered up its own definition of the word: "n. Neologism dating from 2003, contraction of the words "zoo" and "humanity." 1. A human zoo. 2. A new form of eroticism which blends dance movement, acrobatics and beautiful bodies with the sensual caress of the human voice and the pulse of exotic rhythms. 3. An exploration that awakens the most primal urges in human beings."

Cirque would go on to register a special domain and placed a dual English/French language teaser site online there. You could sign up to be on a mailing list to receive updates about the show, however you needed to be 18 years old to participate (or you were directed back to the CDS website). The 18-year age limit caused quite a stir within Cirque fandom, dividing the age groups for the first time since Cirque's debut. Regardless of the age differential, the teaser site did give us a peek at what to expect: Rhythmic Gymnasts (to perform in a duo act), a Middle Eastern dancer (for an exotic dance act), a Drag Queen (transvestite), a Body Builder (strong man), a solo-contortionist to perform in water, and "virile" male, "voluptuous" female dancers - with clowns (by Spymonkey, the Brighton, UK-based theater group), singers (Kinnie Star, a "hip-hop slam poet/freaky beatnik dance rocker", and, of course, a sensuous atmosphere.

"We took over the theatre 18 months ago," explains Ménard as quoted in the Toronto Star, "and tore everything out to rebuild it in cabaret style. The theatre is always a key element in our resident shows, almost a character. And this one will be much more intimate." And they mean it. Seating for Zumanity will include a wide variety of options from "love seats to barstools". "We want to offer people options," said Ménard. You can sit way back high up a stool and be a voyeur, or you can be a participator right down in front. Maybe you want to lounge in the middle with your partner, letting it inspire you. Very warm, very cozy." "We're here to evoke, invoke and provoke," says Ménard, and that's exactly what they're doing.

/// A TWO HEADED COW?

With the signs posted up it seemed creation on the new show was moving along swiftly, yet very little was forthcoming, until August 14, 2002, when a jarring noting was made public: René Richard Cyr – an active player in Quebec's cultural scene for over 20 years - would direct the show rather than Philippe Decouflé. Although Cirque released a statement to the press announcing Cyr's appointment, little else could be gleaned from the announcement, but it was apparent the creative process of this show was not going smoothly. Cirque may have wanted to evoke, invoke and provoke, but it seemed by the time temperatures began warming up again it was apparent the show was still not coming along as planned and the fiery creative process fans first saw documented in "Fire Within" had taken hold. Fascination touched on these rumors in its June 2003 issue:

Earlier this month we reported that the "soft open" date of Zumanity had been pushed back two weeks from Thursday, July 31st to Thursday, August 14th to "address technical demands associated with the production of the new show." Now we have word that Varekai's Dominic Champagne has come in to co-direct with Rene Richard Cyr.

The two-week delay, we understand, was caused by the contractor hired to construct the theater at the New York-New York Hotel-Casino in Las Vegas. Apparently, the contractor thought he had more time to complete the project than he actually had, due to a misreading of the schedule. Suddenly he could not meet the deadline of completion for Cirque's needs, which delayed the installation of special equipment needed to run the show, which in turn pushed back the rehearsal schedule. The theater has now been completed but we've seen what this problem has caused - the first time Cirque has had to announce a delay in the opening of one of its shows.

But the second issue, well, that's a bit more touchy, and sketchy. Zumanity is now suggested as being a "two-headed cow", with Rene Richard Cyr and Dominic Champagne making up those heads. But this pairing leads to a question, why bring in Champagne at all? Was management not happy with Cyr's direction and staging of the show? It seems so. "Guy [Laliberte] said that he was confused after having seen what [Cyr] showed him," Andrew Watson, Director of Creation for Zumanity, admitted to Canadian newspaper La Presse. We've seen how Mr. Laliberte can make it clear if he doesn't like something (remember the apparatus from Varekai he got rid of?), but what does this mean for Zumanity?

It seems that this "human zoo", a show that is set to debut in two months, is going back to the drawing board of a sort. "This morning, we start at zero," said Director Cyr, indicating they plan to go back to the spark of the original idea and start again, albeit with the same performers, talents and performance space as before.

This is a shocking revelation that could have major repercussions for those seeing Zumanity in its first few weeks. Thankfully the upheaval at Zumanity has spared, for the time being, composer Simon Carpenter, who was rumored to have been let go, a suggested cause of the delay in the first place. Either way, on May 22nd the general public will be allowed to buy tickets for performances from August 15th forward, up to 90 days in advance. The "official" star-studded Oscar presenter / nominee gala opening will still be Thursday, September 20th.

Despite those challenges, Zumanity would open to the public on August 15, 2003 for previews.

/// THE ENVELOPING THEATER

Zumanity emphasizes a multicultural approach to the disciplines of dance, movement, acrobatic techniques, costumes and music. In Zumanity, contortion, driving salsa music, fire-eating, uninhibited African dance, tango, waltz and passionate flamenco all speak the same language of excitement and desire. Cirque du Soleil's performers have always been known for taking physical risks, but the risk-taking in Zumanity is also operating on artistic and emotional levels. The 50 members of the cast are more identifiable as individuals than in any previous Cirque du Soleil production. And they are not acting parts written for them, they are playing extensions of themselves — the people they really are. The people who inhabit this "human zoo" come in all shapes and sizes, all ages and conditions, all colors and varieties — and Zumanity rejoices in the infinite variety of ways in which they express their own sexuality and their desire for each other.

This world unfolds in the 1,259-seat Zumanity Theatre, a warm, intimate, organically welcoming space, custom-fitted to Cirque's own innovative design to meet the unique demands of the show. It's an environment that allows the audience to view this mesmerizing adventure. When you step through the doors of the Zumanity Theatre at the New York-New York Hotel and Casino it's as if you're being transported into another time and place. Part of the allure of Cirque du Soleil's shows is their escapist fantasy element. Integral to the experience is the setting of the show; the theatre itself provides a milieu in which the esoteric characters and exotic happenings of the show occur. In order to properly convey that otherworldly feel and elicit the Alice in Wonderland reaction in its audiences, Cirque du Soleil meticulously fashions every element of its theatres, and their attention to detail with the Zumanity theatre is astounding.

Discreetly tucked away in a cozy corner of the bustling New York-New York Casino, just around the corner from "Greenwich Village" lays the Zumanity Theatre entrance, box office and gift shop. The elegant art nouveau style of the theatre contrasts sharply with the campy Disney-does-New York City look of the casino. The box office windows, gift shop gates and theatre doorway are all ornamented with curvaceous metal trimmings. The lush European décor is more than a hint of the sensuality within the theatre.

Once inside, you're immersed in a playfully exotic environment.

Every element of the theatre was meticulously designed and crafted by Cirque du Soleil. The theatre itself becomes a character; sleek, feminine and beautiful. The theatre has an elegant European (French) Art Nouveau style. It is very curvaceous and feminine, simply ornamented and highly stylized. The auditorium is intimate, comfortable and is interestingly laid out with love seats love seats and couches that hug the curvilinear thrust of the stage, a sea of traditional theater seats adorned in lush reds and soft golds, and, of course, rows of cabaret-style barstools that you'll find peppered about. The stage itself is devoid of any clutter save for a baby grand piano with a candelabra sitting on top, which comfortably sits in its center, and draped behind it, a patterned red velvet curtain hangs from the twisted metallic proscenium, hiding the rest of Zumanity from our prying eyes. Two winding metal staircases, which evoke images of intertwining tree branches or strands of DNA, frame the curtain with ease. Atop the proscenium is the bandstand; it can be lowered and raised to showcase the musicians.

Slowly, the theatre starts to come alive, a pianist walks onstage, lights the candles and starts to serenade us with soft piano melodies, and characters slowly trickle down the spiraling staircases and into the crowd...

/// ZUMANITY OF YESTERDAY

(BY: WAYNE LEUNG)

From Cirque du Soleil's humble beginnings on the streets of Baie St. Paul, Quebec, the company has created 14 spectacular live productions while meticulously honing its style and technique with each subsequent show. The past few shows especially exhibit a new and different style (a necessary result of the introduction of new creative teams). Zumanity continues the trend of trying new styles and themes and takes its concept of an erotic cabaret version of Cirque du Soleil to bold new levels. If the past few shows were about the coming-of-age of Cirque du Soleil, Zumanity is about being of age at Cirque du Soleil.

Zumanity is a show, which celebrates sex and human sexuality. On a deeper level the show explores themes of love and life and celebrates both as a physical manifestation by the human body and its interaction with other humans. It is very risqué and definitely not recommended for the faint-of-heart or narrow-of-mind. Firstly, it is NOT a circus. Don't go in expecting one or you'll be disappointed. What Zumanity is, is an erotic cabaret incorporating some circus elements with music, dance (much are more prominent in this show than in any other previous Cirque production), costumes/fashion and comedy.

And, to answer the question on everyone's mind; no, there is no actual full-frontal nudity in the show, however some of the costumes are very revealing and most of the female cast members perform topless (as do the males for that matter). Zumanity obviously shows a lot more skin than before, but the baring of flesh is done in an artistic context, the performers' bodies are shown so the audience can admire their beauty. In my opinion the show succeeds in being sexy without being sleazy.

From the moment you enter the theatre you're enveloped in its sensual atmosphere, the setting for the show is perfectly established before the show even begins. Slowly, the theatre starts to come alive, a pianist walks onstage, lights the candles and starts to serenade us with soft piano melodies, and characters slowly trickle down the spiraling staircases and into the crowd. The svelte Venezuelan dancer Antonio Drija wades through the crowd as viewers are being seated and flirts with the women, posing for Polaroid pictures with them. "Call me Papito," he says and the audience obliges every time he walks by.

The full-bodied identical twins, the Botero sisters, Luciene and Licemar of Brazil, walk deep into the audience. Dressed in French maid outfits they bear large trays of strawberries to serve to the guests. Unfortunately while bending over to serve one guest the sisters inevitable give a neighboring guest a face full of posterior. A dark and mysterious character (played by Spanish actor Almukatab) watches the audience from centre stage with a snake draped around his neck. The piano music continues, there are faint whispers throughout the theatre, characters slowly emerge. The scene is very similar to the Varekai pre-show, if you were to replace the Varekai forest with a burlesque house. The sensuous atmosphere envelops the viewer and sets the tone perfectly. The impeccable establishment of a show's setting is one of Co-director Domenic Champagne's signatures.

Amidst the bustle of the pre-show Madame makes her way onstage. Our hostess for the evening is played by famed New York drag queen Joey Arias. She carries a microphone ornamented with a long ponytail of hair and croons into it with a sultry voice reminiscent of Billie Holiday. Madame wears a long bottom-baring dress, she greets the crowd and welcomes them to open their minds and discard their inhibitions; "Sit back, relax, have a cocktail, because the more you drink the more beautiful I look. . .and the more f**ked up you get!" No sooner has Madame welcomed us to Zumanity than the theatre is invaded by Puritans who are opposed to such wanton displays of carnal sin. Dressed in pilgrim costumes the show's resident "clowns" of the British comedy troupe Spymonkey wield pitchforks with protest placards attached and plead with the audience to leave, "you can still save your souls. . ." The crowd has a good laugh at the vaguely Monty Pythonesque antics of the Puritans.

EXTRAVAGANZA

As the prudes are escorted out of the theatre by security the show begins. The theatre rules are sung to the audience by the powerfully voiced Lonnie Gordon who shares the shows singing duties with Joey Arias and Canadian Kinnie Starr. The show begins with a flourish, as thundering house music fills the theatre we are treated to a fashion show of characters, but this is no ordinary fashion show. Each character to come down the catwalk is more strange and exotic than the last. We meet a centaur character named Jesús, two Las Vegas showboys, an alien/robot, a slim masked girl and a host of other fascinating characters.

WIND & WASSA

The fashion show evolves into a dance sequence. Dance is infused throughout the entire show, not only are the majority of the acts dance oriented but dance is also used in all transitions and, in choreographer Debra Brown's signature style, the show flows like a ballet, each image fading into the next, the show continuously evolving. One by one, a flamenco dancer, an African dancer (similar to Dralion's Gaia), and the Dark Lord character (who wears a long flowing cape) all take the stage. A beautiful contortionist named Olga rises and descends on a Spanish web apparatus.

WATER BOWL

As we start to take everything in Madame returns and invites us to quench our thirst with a drink of water, motioning to the center of the stage where a clear glass pool rises out of the stage with two beautiful and slim women swimming inside like sirens in a fishbowl. The act that ensues is gorgeous and sensual. Our sirens are Zorigtkhuyag Bolormaa and Gyulnara Karaeva, contortionists from Mongolia and Russia respectively. They emerge from their small pool to perform balances and contortion on the edge eventually diving back in to frolic in the water. While the caliber of the contortion is not as high as in other Cirque shows what makes this act strikingly beautiful is the flowing choreography. Characters sit on stage during the act as if to frame it. The water adds a fascinating element to the art of contortion.

ROSES

Next, a deep male voice from the rear of the stage asks, "Who wants some roses?" The Rose Boy (buff Cuban Alex Castro) struts on stage and starts stripping to a brassy jazz tune. Bikini-clad female dancers surround Rose Boy as he strips and tosses roses to ladies in the audience.

DISLOCATION

Russian Moukhtar Gusengadzhiev appears wearing boxers, socks and garter belts. His ordinary appearance gives no hint of his extraordinary talents. Moukhtar is a dislocation artist. To an upbeat brass-heavy jazz accompaniment Moukhtar performs an act I describe as extreme contortion, not only do his bones bend in ways they're not supposed to but the performer has a unique ability to dislocate some bones altogether to shocked amazement of the audience, which gasped audibly throughout this act. Moukhtar turns himself into a human pretzel before our very eyes.

2 MEN

Following the extreme contortion comes another dance act, this one a pas de deux performed by two men to a Spanish tango. Johan King Silverhult of Sweden and Ugo Mazin of the UK perform an aggressive and violent dance. Underlying the machismo is a strong homoerotic undercurrent and the building sexual tension between the dancers crescendos at the end of the act when the two men share a kiss. This daring and provocative act is a prime example of Zumanity's use of dance and movement to convey powerful images and develop a strong sense of visual lyricism.

DANCE ON TV

This visual lyricism and narrative of movement continues in the next act. The stage fills with men seated on chairs intently watching a football game on a television. A female dancer in a red bikini intensely and passionately dances to attract their attention but the men ignore her. As Kinnie Starr sings a soft yet edgy rock ballad, the dancer thrashes on top of the TV and eventually lunges towards the men who are still oblivious to her creating a lyrical, poetic and intense dance performance.

BODY2BODY

When the dust settles, a man and a woman emerge (Americans Stéphan Choinière and Sara Joel) wearing skimpy costumes so that they appear to be naked. The two perform an acrobatic dance/hand-to-hand act called body2body. This act reminded me of the Statue act in Quidam but with more fluid choreography and an intense sexual passion expressed in the movement. As Joey Arias sings a love ballad to a soft brass arrangement, the two dancers intertwine in a beautiful expression of love.

Up to this point, the show is very intense. For some comic relief the Puritans return and slowly shed their sexual apprehensions. One of them carries a blow-up doll on stage. When the others chastise him for it he runs off, returns carrying a larger doll and takes a seat in the audience. The doll then comes to life and starts to chase the puritan around the theatre. The others briefly emerge on stage to quickly spoof some of the preceding acts with visual gags (much like a short version of the Dralion clown act).

FIRE

When all of the silliness subsides it is time to turn up the heat, literally. As trance-techno music plays, the sado-masochism tableau begins. A flame erupts from the stage and two sexy leather bikini-clad fire artists; Americans Jila Alaghamandan and Heidi Good cavort on stage with fire batons and perform a dangerously seductive dance where they literally light themselves on fire and eat flame. Following the dance a cage lowers from the rafters and a man and woman inside dance violently as masked characters descend from the ceiling and flail about in chains. This intense scene gives way to the re-emergence of the Puritans.

This time they are nude carrying only cheerleader style pom-poms placed to strategically conceal their nudity. In a Vaudeville style comedy act the four Spymonkeys line up in a row and march to the music while quickly switching the positions of the pom poms; at times not quick enough to seamlessly hide their (prosthetic) genitals. The number elicited a good deal of laughter from a crowd grateful for a brief repose from the intense show.

TISSUES

The next act is a romantic aerial dance between a woman (the strikingly beautiful Russian Olga Vershinina) and a dwarf (Brazilian Alan Jones Silva). This is the one act that will make your jaw drop and elicit gasps of awe. The apparatus is a combination of the Aerial Silks and the Cloud Swing. Olga begins by performing aerial contortion in the flowing white fabric while incorporating some extremely dangerous looking Spanish Web style drops on the silk and the Cloud Swing. And, to a beautiful piano melody the pair flies over the heads of the audience in a touching and romantic moment.

GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Then, in a change of pace, the couple from the cage in the S&M sequence is now in a bathtub and, while they perform a dance/pantomime the entire cast files onto the stage and sprawls across the floor. The turntable spins to show the cast in a variety of seductive poses. Madame then sends two characters to invite a man and a woman up on stage to join in the "Garden of Delights". Joey Arias' sharp wit is apparent when speaking to the guests.

PACEMAKERS

As Madame continues to work the crowd she stumbles upon an elderly couple (in their 70s) seated on one of the couches in the front row. She congratulates them for not being scared away by the content of the show and encourages them to come on stage to slow-dance. Just when the frail old couple starts to dance they pull off the top layer of their clothes to reveal costumes; they are audience plants. The crowd cheers with delight as Danes Flemming and Brigit Thomsen, known as "The Pacemakers" perform an acrobatic dance routine, which would be impressive for a couple a fraction of their age. Their dance is a touching reminder of the endurance of love.

As The Pacemakers wind down their dance the cast of Zumanity joins them on stage for their curtain call. The audience cheers enthusiastically. The journey through the Garden of Delights is over but what a memorable journey it was.

/// THE OTHER SIDE...

Seeing Zumanity is like making love for the first time," said reviewer Wayne Leung. "You go in curious, excited, and maybe even a little nervous not really knowing what to expect. The experience itself is intense on many different levels, there are surprises and things that are not necessarily what you had expected or imagined. Then afterwards you're left exhilarated and wanting more!" But unfortunately the audience did want something more. The show fell with a thud during previews.

Original singer Kinnie Star left the show early on, and the way we heard it she wasn't satisfied with the direction the music of the show was taking, so she and Cirque came to an amicable parting. (One might speculate that she was expecting more of a featured role in the show music, and the music's evolution didn't meet her expectations.) We also heard that, at Guy Laliberté's insistence, the fire performers also left. Evidently Guy did not want any fire in this show; they were replaced with an aerial hoops act. And then there was the CD: it had been delayed while Cirque re-thought the entire endeavor, as the original album didn't reflect the current state of the show after numerous changes Cirque had implemented. And when finally released (on March 22, 2005) the new version – the "Inspired by" soundtrack - didn't win over fans either. There was very little music from the actual show, English lyrics, poems and narration that did not exist before. We speculate that this might have been done to "inspire" romance where a straight soundtrack would not do, but the drastic departure left the Zumanity album to become the weakest soundtrack in Cirque Musique's canon.

Even so, by the time Zumanity had its gala premiere on October 19, 2003 the show had come together even more. And it would take quite a while – and even more changes – before the show would find its place in Las Vegas. Through the years Zumanity has endured, which shows us that even if a show premieres as a dud it can be salvaged given the right attention. Sometimes that requires just a tweak and sometimes that requires more drastic action – such as re-arranging the flow of the show and putting out a new visual and advertising campaign, which is exactly what Cirque du Soleil did. Along with the new look, the show also moved away from the “Another Side of Cirque du Soleil” billing in favor of a brand new tagline, emphasizing that ZUMANITY really is “The Sensual Side of Cirque du Soleil.”

Thanks to Cirque du Soleil’s more drastic tactics, Zumanity has been able to celebrate a number of “wet and quivering orgasms”. And here's to many more earth-shattering, mind-altering, body-tingling cries in the darkness! But what about the show today?

/// ZUMANITY OF TODAY

EXTRAVAGANZA

A fanfare of horns and drums announces the conclusion of the show. One by one, the cast members make their fashionable entrance, parading down the catwalk in costumes every bit as vibrant, bold, and diverse as their spectrum of talents and personalities. It’s an incandescent finale to the colourful cast of performers who have guided the audience on their journey into the world of Zumanity.

WIND

All at once, a storm sweeps over the stage as Marcela, Queen of the Wind, summons the spirits in a fevered flamenco dance. With smouldering intensity, her hypnotic dance stirs the soul, arouses the imagination and prepares the senses for an uninhibited transformation.

WASSA

Marcela awakens an unbridled passion in Wassa. Exploding into a vigorous African dance, her arms, legs and torso take on a primal energy of their own, moving in time to an erotic and intoxicating tribal rhythm.

WATER BOWL

Abandoning their innocence, two sweet and pure contortionists (Ulziibayar Chimed, Bolormaa Zorigtkhuyag, Estefania Laurino and Gyulnara Karaeva) wash away their inhibitions and taste love for the first time. Fluidly they glide through the water, striking an amazing array of sensual poses and exploring their physical, sexual and creative limits all at once.

HOOPS

Julia Kolsova brings schoolgirl fantasies to life. She gyrates and swivels as she guides her hoops up and down her lithe frame. Dreams take flight as she soars through the air, performing daring feats of aerial choreography.

ROSES

“Willie Bronco” peels away his tough exterior to expose his weakness ... for the ladies. He tantalizes and teases the audience by revealing his chiseled body bit by bit in a sinfully seductive striptease.

HAND-2-HAND

In an aggressive but intimate hand-balancing duet, Katerina Bazarova and Valeriy Simonenko entwine in a powerful act with breathtaking acrobatic-inspired manoeuvres. Their flawless movements thrust the two kindred spirits into a provocative tale of lust.

DISLOCATION

A limber Lothario, Arslan Gusengadzhiev performs on command for his sadistic sirens, who take pleasure in watching him squirm. Redefining flexibility, his elastic body bends, twists, and contorts into nature-defying positions.

DANCE ON TV

Gorgeous and sweet, Felix Cane breaks out of her shell to grab her lover’s attention. Turning up the heat on love gone flat, she ignites the stage with her feminine wiles, performing a sultry dance and alluring gymnastics to rekindle the flame and make her lover see her again as if for the very first time.

2 MEN

Lovers Jellison and Gabriel Corbin dance a tumultuous tango. Through their fierce choreography, a passionate story of love and anger unfolds. Again and again they attract and repel in intense conflict until the magnetic energy between them becomes more than they can bear.

STRAPS

Louise Yorath, alone on stage in fragile silence, is bound by her straps. In an exercise of self-inflicted pleasure and pain, she uses the leather to tease and torture herself, and slips seamlessly from one auto-erotic aerial figure to the next, trapped in her bonds all the while. To the sounds of heavy breathing, gentle moans of ecstasy and the friction of her straps, Louise’s self-pleasuring bondage flight draws to a climactic finale.

HAND BALANCING

Dima Shine is alone, going in circles around his pole. He has just about given up on love when he meets a lovely contortionist who seems to fit into his world. She brings him back to earth in this beautiful act.

TISSUS

Though he desperately tries to catch her attention, Alan Jones Silva remains unnoticed by Anna o’Keefe, the muse whose beauty propels him to soar to new heights. Finally, the once-unattainable object of his affection is within arms’ reach, and their two worlds come together at the finale of this mesmerizing aerial dance.

MIDNIGHT BATH

You can't keep love locked up in a bedroom...so Vanessa Convery and Ed Bohlen give their imaginations free rein and let fantasy take them to unexpected places. Using milk as their medium, they caress each other's flesh in a luscious sexual experiment.

ROUE CYR

Jonas Woolverton is brought to the stage on his knees. A slave to love and forced to perform for his Mistress, he spins and turns inside his wheel while she cracks her whip. He is eager to please, even donning a blindfold for some of his tricks. One can only hope the pleasure is worth the pain he receives...

GENTLE ORGY

The cast emerges from every orifice of the theatre, drawing the audience into their hedonistic play. In duos and trios, and some flying solo, they assume a smorgasbord of sexual positions on a lazily revolving stage, where they touch, stroke, moan and embrace until the tension builds to an orgasmic conclusion.

* * *

The Zumanity of today is a much more complete artistic piece than what Cirque du Soleil presented its audience at the show's birth. Not only did the artists get more at ease with their expressive roles, but Cirque du Soleil became more and more content with its own creation, and in turn we as spectators became more comfortable and by extension tolerant and inviting of them as well. Yes, the show has evolved, grown-up; some of the family has moved on (Joey Arias, for example, left the show in 2007 to be replaced with Eddie, the Mistress of Seduction), and even some of the acts have come and gone (the "Fire" act only lasted through previews; "The Pacemakers" left the show at the end of 2004; "Spymonkey's" in 2005; "Handbalancing" and "Roué Cyr" joined in 2010), the show has matured into one of the best Cirque du Soleil shows in the company's repertoire.

Solstrom™

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL™



THE
COMPLETE
SERIES



Solstrom

After the ratings success, critical acclaim, and Emmy and Gemini award wins garnered by 2002's groundbreaking documentary series *Fire Within*, it was no surprise that Cirque du Soleil would aim to prove its prowess in the realm of television wasn't just a fluke. Thus following hard on the heels of *Fire Within* came a new variety series looking for success.

SOLSTROM, a combination of "solar wind" (*sol*, which is inspired by the sun) and "strom" (from German meaning "current") is a 13-part variety series as unique an experience as Cirque is itself. The series draws inspiration from silent films, situation comedy, burlesque theatre and Cirque du Soleil's own live shows, presenting a new perspective on the circus arts on television. Each episode weaves a unique array of never-before-televized Cirque performances into a unique style of storytelling, leading viewers through a mesmerizing dream world of fantasy and reality.

The series was described as follows: "A sandbox transforms into a construction site. A high wire shimmers across a hotel lobby.

Icarian aliens go slumming at a cosmic discotheque. Get ready to play games of fear, games of romance, games of chance - even extraterrestrial games - with some truly unforgettable characters as the legendary Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil comes to CBC Television, taking viewers into a world of dreaming and game-playing where they will encounter everything from romance to childhood and from the cosmic to escapism. It's all done through the magic that has made Cirque du Soleil an international sensation."

But were audiences and fans alike ready for this cosmic wind?

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	November 30, 2003 (CBC) April 11, 2004 (Bravo)
Type:	TV Series / Reality
Director:	Various
Producers:	Marie Côté Vincent Gagné Martin Bolduc
Episodes:	13 / 44 minutes long
Time:	Sundays @ 8:00pm



/// EPISODE 1: “ROCKIN’ WINDS” (“MUSIC”)

Things aren't going so well in a concert hall as an orchestra prepares for a rehearsal. The maestro – who takes everything very personally – along with his devoted first violin, do everything they can to restore order. Despite their best efforts, things get worse! The musicians show no signs of discipline at all. They arrive late and are distracted. One of them even falls madly in love. Behind the scenes, the technicians join the chaos and perform acrobatic stunts rather than concentrate on repairs. The Baron from Saltimbanco observes the havoc and blows solar wind towards anyone who might disrupt the rehearsal. Even the Baron is distracted by all the commotion especially when a group of acrobats overrun the stage and defy the laws of gravity!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of the Baron from Saltimbanco -- What secrets lie behind the Baron's sardonic grin? Before you can find out, he has you locked in his hypnotic gaze. He beckons you with his gravelly voice. He is your timeless, ageless guide into the world of Saltimbanco. The Baron is both your ally and your enemy. If you approach him, he may transform himself, or disappear only to reappear. If you get too close, you may disappear yourself. If you can trust him, follow his lead. Performed by Martin Boisvert
- Banquine from Quidam -- Two porters face each other and the flyer stands on their interlaced hands. They push with their arms to “juggle” their flyer. Performed by Konstantin Besstchevtny, Maria Boutina, Elena Kolesnikova, Dmitri Koukva, Vladimir Fomine, Alexandre Leontiev, Alexandre Maiorov, Sergei Okhai, Alexandre Pestov, Roman Polishchuk, Dmitro Sidorenko, Svetelana Souvorova, Igor Strijanov, Alexandre Zaitsev and Konstantin Zahkarenko.
- Washington Trapeze from O -- Using a specially designed trapeze this acrobat performs amazing head-balancing maneuvers. Performed by Anja Wyttenbach.
- Aerial Hoops from Dralion -- Acrobat performs acrobatic poses on a hoop high above the stage. Performed by Geneviève Bessette.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Contortion -- Performed by Daniel Browning Smith
- Mechanical Fantasies (tuba-mobile, music stand and various) -- Performed by Ulik
- Musical Fantasy (Car Horn Concerto) -- Performed by Michel Lauzière
- Rola Bola -- Performed by Vladimir Dubovsky
- Tightwire -- Performed by Roberto, Rudi and Ray Navas
- Trampo-guitar -- Performed by Dominic Dagenais
- Singing Aerial Silks -- Performed by Béo Da Silva

EPISODE REVIEW

Fans of John Gilkey, one of Cirque's most prolific artists as a veteran of Quidam, Dralion and Varekai, will be delighted to see John in his newest incarnation; a mad scientist character named Fogus Punch. Fogus looks like a cross between La Vigie in Varekai and Beakman from Beakman's World (for those who remember the zany kid's science show). Fogus is our guide throughout the series, an astronomer who serendipitously discovers life on the sun. A magical solar life force has been beamed to Earth and personifies itself as a series of recognizable Cirque du Soleil characters. A little bit irritating though is the inane narration that permeates the episode. Fogus' voice-over (which is not done by John) describes the happenings in a banal, everyday manner, not poetically or inventively at all. The narration adds nothing to the show and in fact detracts from it. While the images speak vividly in Cirque's live shows; the narration in Solstrom seems an unfit substitute for well thought-out images and staging.

The first episode of Solstrom, entitled "Rockin' Wind," features the Baron character from Saltimbanco (originally created by renowned mime René Bazinet, in Solstrom the character is played by Martin Boisvert). The Baron descends upon an orchestra rehearsal where nothing is going well. A look at the conductor and first violin gives a clue as to why; they are played by Dralion clowns Gonzalo Munoz Ferrer and Colin Wesley Gee respectively. Unfortunately, their antics are no less tiresome here than in Dralion.

Gonzalo plays Maestro Von Pom Pom Pom (the "Poms" are set to the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). He is the cantankerous and temperamental tyrant of the orchestra. While desperately trying to get his musicians in order a latecomer stumbles in chaotically and disrupts the proceedings. The Maestro begins to chide him when the Baron blows a puff of the magical Solstrom at the latecomer. The latecomer is actually extreme contortionist and dislocation artist Daniel Browning Smith. Smith contorts into unbelievable shapes. He squeezes his flexible body through a tennis racket and inverts himself in many impossible poses, often by dislocating his joints. The performance is jaw dropping though slightly grotesque. For his finale Smith contorts into a small ball and fits himself inside a 20" x 20" x 24" box where he stays for the remainder of the show, sometimes popping up to watch the proceedings.

After the initial commotion the first violin (Colin Gee) is distracted by an attractive female orchestra member. She approaches and kisses him passionately on the lips. The Baron's puff of Solstrom transforms her into a wild temptress dressed in red. The first of the acts adapted from live Cirque du Soleil shows featured in the pilot episode is Genviève Bessette's stunning solo aerial hoop number from Dralion. Originally part of a trio of aerial hoop performers featured in Quidam, Genviève refined a solo version of the act for incorporation into Dralion as an act in rotation. When I saw this act last spring (performed by another Quidam alumna, Marie-Eve Bisson) it was a shining moment in an otherwise lackluster performance. The breathtaking choreography, set to the Spanish flavoured song "Anima", is full of passion and emotion, perfectly fitting the fire element that it represents in Dralion. Although when taken in Solstrom's context the emotional gravity is subdued, it is nonetheless a treat to finally see a filmed version of this magnificent act.

No sooner has the orchestra been successfully called to order than someones watch chimes and the musicians break for lunch. The guitarist sits at his music stand and falls asleep. Fogus does a "brain scan" and monitors his dream. The guitarist dreams of playing rock chords on an electric guitar. He falls backward only to spring right back up. The guitarist proceeds to execute flips on a trampoline all the while playing his guitar. The performer is actually Domenic Dagenais, a former Canadian trampoline champion.

Next, to the horror of the first violin, a spotlight burns out and he realizes the Maestro will be furious unless someone fixes it. He stops a stagehand but a puff of the solar wind transforms the stagehand into a balance artist. Vladimir Dubovsky uses an array of boards and aluminum pipes stacked precariously like a deck of cards in a daring balancing act. Vladimir executes this act with a more than a hint of Chaplin. His presentation and music are reminiscent of the Vaudeville stage.

Before the Maestro can regain order he is stricken by a beautiful prima donna who has entered the hall with her accompanist. She prepares to sing but a puff of the Solstrom and we find her hanging in the air supported by white silks. Our diva is Béo Da Silva and with a sultry voice she belts out a sassy jazz song entitled "New Attitude" written by former La Nouba singer Dessy Di Lauro. While singing live she performs some beautiful aerial silk work. This unique combination number has a slightly surreal Moulin Rouge feel and is one of the most enjoyable of the episode. When the dust settles there is still the matter of the burnt out spotlight to attend to. A group of stagehands climb up a set of scaffolds but the Baron works his magic and they become daredevil high wire performers. The Navas Family (three brothers) scamper and dance across a high wire before performing death-defying leaps and pyramids all while remaining perfectly balanced on the thin wire.

Then we observe a metronome slowly ticking back and forth. The Baron works his magic and the pendulum transforms into a trapeze artist. The orchestra watches as Anja Wyttenbach perched on a Washington trapeze, carefully balanced on her head while going through a series of poses. This act, taken from "O" is performed to a piece of music credited as "Debbie" but more commonly known as the Journey of Man theme. The trapeze number is cut short. In "O" there is a static as well as swinging portion but only the static is shown here. Disappointing given the amount of time allotted to each episode, there is no need to truncate such a beautiful and well-crafted act.

As if another interruption was needed, the rehearsal is invaded by wacky Michel Lauzière who aims to play music of his own on bicycle horns of different pitch strapped all over his body. He executes a wild choreography to play the horns and serenades the orchestra with his rendition of the Danube Waltz, The Four Seasons and other classical selections.

Finally the Maestro gives in and the rehearsal descends into chaos as the musicians, stagehands and house staff transform. If there were to be one act I considered to be Cirque du Soleil's signature it would be Banquine from Quidam. This act has been proudly showcased by the company in a variety of different competitions, media projects and special events including Journey of Man and the 2002 Oscar performance. This episode of Solstrom closes with the Banquine troupe performing a number called "Tribute to Rock 'n Roll"

Though much of the choreography is the same as the routine from Quidam, the troupe appears sans make-up and wearing different costumes; black pants and coloured t-shirts for the guys, simple black dresses for the ladies. This elite acrobatic group has only improved with age and now performs some skills that are far more spectacular than the ones we've previously seen on film. Among the new tricks is a super jump where four performers are launched simultaneously, cross paths in mid-air barely avoiding collision and are caught again by the able porters. Though stripped of the dramatic intensity of the live show the Banquine act still shines as an amazing acrobatic display.

/// EPISODE 2: “ONCE UPON A WIND” (“ADVENTURE”)

Gaya and Quidam (from Dralion and Quidam respectively) spread the solar wind and give people the opportunity to free themselves from their daily routine. Some even acquire unnatural powers. Gaya blows solar wind in a boy’s adventure storybook and life at home changes. The day begins as usual with the morning rush in the family kitchen as the young boy reads his storybook. He discovers and observes his mother flying through the air, his grandfather doing crazy things, a jungle explorer, an expert thief, and even a gorilla grabbing hold of a colonialist! The pages of his storybook come to life before his eyes. Suddenly, a wind blows the pages out of the kitchen window. They appear at his mother’s job at the museum. Other pages land in his father’s office and wreak havoc as the rigid boss struggles to maintain order to no avail. This brings great pleasure to Gaya and Quidam, not to mention those working at the office!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of Gaya from Dralion -- Featured in the touring show Dralion, Gaya is goddess of Earth-warm, comforting, and rhythmic. Her tribal dance echoes the pulse of human life. Her beaming smile can melt the coldest hearts. Dralion is an unprecedented fusion of ancient Chinese acrobatic traditions and the avant-garde approach of Cirque du Soleil that pays homage to the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Gaya is played by Henriette Gbou.
- Body2Body from Zumanity -- Acrobatic act combining still poses and feats of elevation and balance, performed by two or more artists. Performed by Sara Joel and Stephan Choinière
- Aerial Silks from La Nouba -- Acrobat rolls and moves along length of two cloths suspended from ceiling. Also does circles above the stage, “flying” through the air. Performed by Ana Ginger Griep Ruiz.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Acrobatic Ball -- by Frédéric Barette
- Aerial Straps -- by Igor Zaripov
- Cosmic Ballet -- by Rodrigue "Chocolat" Tremblay and Nicolette Hazewinkel
- Fire Manipulation (The Walkyries and Friends) -- by: Éliane Bonin, Charlyne Guay, Danielle Hubbard, Marie-Chantal Rivard and Maryse Thivierge
- Hand-balancing on Canes -- by Dimitri Proudnikov
- Hand-to-Hand -- by Nasko and Jordan Balaktchiev
- Icaris Games (Les Castors) -- by Charly, Toly and Eddy Dedessus
- Juggling -- by Steven Ragatz
- Percussion (BAM) -- by: Jean-Sébastien Dallaire, Steve Burman and Denis Richard
- Spanish Web -- by Jonathan Morin

EPISODE REVIEW

In the second installment of Solstrom mad scientist/astronomer Fogus Punch (John Gilkey) tracks two solar wind characters (Gaya from Dralion and Quidam from Quidam) to a London library. The costuming and set dressing suggest that it is the 1930s or 40s. A boy is combing the shelves looking for a storybook. Gaya influences his decision by huffing solar wind onto a particular book which jumps out at the boy. It is an adventure/comic book filled with the stories of action heroes. The boy checks the book out and takes it home. The next morning Gaya emerges in the boy's family's kitchen and the solar wind blows apart the binding of the book so the magic infused pages fly out the window and disperse all over town. Those who pick up the pages fall under the solstrom's spell.

While the first episode landed with a klunk due to some major artistic and pacing problems, the second episode hits the ground running and is able to build up some momentum. Overall this episode is a great improvement over the first. The quality of the individual acts is more consistent, the story arc, although still weak, is more cohesive and better developed. Even the music has improved. Though still overly reliant on synthesizers the original music, written by Sylvain Charles Grand and Dominique Grand, possesses a hint of the simple charm of the very early Dupéré compositions (circa *Le Cirque Reinventé*). The artistic presentation of the episode borrows from the themes of Quidam and Varekai though they aren't as effectively developed as in those shows. During the episode a family's ho-hum daily existence is transformed into a fantasy of adventure stories and action heroes.

We begin in the family's home at breakfast. The parents busily prepare for work while the child flips through his storybook. Dad leaves to catch the bus while the child looks at a page with a drawing of a Wonder Woman-like comic book heroine. His mom, in the midst of folding a red towel, transforms in a flash into the heroine from the book and the towel becomes a long silk "cape" which she uses to perform a wonderful aerial silk act. Mom is played by Ginger Ana Griep Ruiz from La Nouba. Though only a supporting performer in the Aerial Ballet act in the live show, Solstrom gives this highly talented aerialist the opportunity to perform some high-calibre skills on the aerial tissue apparatus. Though similar acts have appeared in numerous Cirque du Soleil shows I couldn't help but marvel at the masterful skill possessed by this particular performer.

After Mom has landed we check in with Dad who is waiting for the bus. A figure with a familiar "face", the headless Quidam, walks by and inspires one of the gentlemen at the bus stop to find delight in manipulating the light fixture from a nearby street lamp (actually a small blue ball). The man exhibits his dexterity as he rolls the ball across his body, bounces it on his head and his briefcase. He then adds more balls and starts to juggle. The "suitcase juggling" is performed by Steven Andrew Ragatz, a veteran Cirque performer who was part of the Manipulation trio seen in previous incarnations of *Mystère* and *Quidam*.

We join Dad's co-workers dressed in suits and wearing bowler hats, either in homage to or directly copying the thematic elements of Quidam (which are inspired by the paintings of surrealist René Magritte), as they arrive for work at a large accounting office. The workers sit in a room with ranks of desks each with an old-fashioned manual adding machine on the corner.

They settle in and synchronously work in a rhythmic choreography meant to symbolize the monotony and uniformity of the work-a-day world. Overseeing the workers is the grumpy Ebenezer Scrooge-like boss, the cantankerous foible of this week's episode, played by Cirque alumnus Rodgrigue "Chocolat" Tremblay of Le Cirque Réinventé.

As a page from the magic book sails in from a window a male and female employee simultaneously reach to pick it up. When they touch the sheet their business attire melts away into swanky leather garb, invoking images of John Steed and Emma Peel from the British television series the Avengers. Played by Sara Joel and Stephan Choinière the duo takes the concept of an office romance to dazzling new heights by performing a sizzling balancing/adagio act to a British spy film score. This performance is an adaptation of the Body2Body act the pair performs in Zumanity. In Solstrom, the performers are fully clothed and the sexually explicit choreography is toned down for a PG audience. Though not overtly sexual the act is still beautiful and sensually performed by this talented pair.

Back at home, Mom leaves for work and Grandpa arrives to baby sit the boy. Grandpa is a little mischievous himself and as soon as Mom is gone he invites two friends over to play poker. However, Gaya transforms the three gentlemen into foot jugglers. This acrobatic group known as Les Castors consists of three brothers aged 54, 58 and 60. While Russian/Ukrainian dance music plays the trio reclines on chairs and juggles diverse items back and forth including basketballs, rolled carpets, a child's bed and even each other. Eventually the men settle back down to finish their poker game, neglecting the Boy who sneaks out in search of his parents.

Back at the office Dad sneaks in late. However another encounter with the magic book has caused the office to become overgrown with jungle foliage. One employee transforms into an Indiana Jones-type character. A large wooden ball comes rolling through the office. Our adventurer hops on top of it and scampers across the room, performing a series of flips all while remaining on the ball, much to the chagrin of the increasingly agitated boss. The performer is Frédéric Barrette a 2003 graduate of Montreal's École Nationale de Cirque (National Circus School).

From the chaos of Dad's office we cut to the quiet museum where Mom works. We happen upon a janitor who is looking at an ancient Egyptian artifact and daydreaming. A page from the magic book floats by and suddenly the Janitor is transformed into a cat burglar. He dons a black cap and sprays mist at the artifact's enclosure. Laser beams protecting the exhibit are revealed. The burglar realizes the only way to get to his loot is from above. Hence, he climbs up a Spanish Web (vertical rope) and attempts to swipe the treasure. Jonathan Morin (part of the Spanish Web team in Quidam) makes a dramatic plunge from the ceiling, the rope tied around his body arresting his fall at the last possible second. Before he can make the grab a visitor walks by and he quickly scampers back up the rope. When the coast is clear he plunges again and again, each attempt foiled by a passer-by. This is one of the most inventive adaptations of an existing Cirque act featured in the series so far.

Back at the office, the workers leave for their lunch break and Scrooge is left alone with his beautiful assistant. He is in love with her though she adores another man. In an attempt to win her heart Scrooge presents his assistant with a gift; a pair of ballet slippers.

She slips them on and the two dance a comic pas de deux mock ballet during which the boss strips down to his underwear. The dancers are real-life husband and wife Rodrigue Tremblay and Nicollette Hazewinkett. Upon the return of his employees the Boss drops his love-interest and quickly scrambles to put his clothes back on.

Back at the museum Mom receives a huge crate with a new exhibit inside. She signs for the shipment and leaves. As the deliveryman pries open the crate he magically transforms into a warrior, dressed in an ancient Roman-style costume similar to that worn by the Aerial Strap artist in Nouvelle Expérience. The crate contains a large stone with a sword embedded in it. Could the sword be Excalibur? Could our warrior be King Arthur? The performer uses the sword as a hand balancing cane and demonstrates his extraordinary strength by performing an agile series of poses and balances on the cane, not touching down until the end of the act. The hand balancer is the remarkably talented 18-year-old Dimitri Prudnikov.

Mom observes a painting which has slowly changed during the course of the day and as she is turned away Quidam walks by and she disappears. Returning to the office we find that it has become even more of a jungle as the foliage grows thicker, and the office workers start to shed their suits in favour of more tribal attire. Some wear their ties as headbands. The boy arrives and finds his father. Overjoyed to see his son the father picks him up but they are affected by Gaya's solar wind and we find them performing a beautiful adagio/hand-to-hand act similar to the one performed in Saltimbanco. The boy, possessing all the grace and flexibility of a young Anton Chelnokov, precariously balances on his father in a variety of poses in a beautiful performance.

The storybook has not yet finished wreaking its havoc on the office. Another page inspires Tarzan to materialize. Played by Igor Zaripov, Tarzan flies through the air in a high-flying aerial strap act. The 20-year-old performer displays remarkable gymnastic ability.

Finally, Gaya and Quidam emerge at the office. Mom is transported there as well and the office workers transform into a funky dance tribe and party late into the night. As "Aborigenes Jam" (the Hoop Diving song from Dralion) strikes up the tribe accentuates the music with a variety of percussion instruments, and the Amazon warriors join the party as a group of female fire jugglers dance to the beat. The finale is performed by BAM, a street percussion group and Walkyries, a group of fire jugglers who are a product of the 2002 Cirque du Monde outreach program.

/// EPISODE 3: “WIND OF FREEDOM” (“ESCAPE”)

Prison guards are lounging around the courtyard, enjoying the sunshine, when a new inmate is admitted. The newcomer is not welcomed by the crowd of convicts. After all, he is not exactly the ideal accomplice to help them escape, since he doesn't do anything right. With the help of solar wind from Boum-Boum, prisoners escape by the simplest means - stealing keys while guards dance or squeezing through the narrow cell bars or more complex - with a helicopter bouncing from objects to reach the top of a wall. One thing is clear: these are spectacular escape plans... but will everyone escape?

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of Boum Boum -- In Quidam, Boum-Boum is aggressive and physically fit. And yet, he is lifeless, as though his body lives on only because his soul refuses to leave it. This boxer, with his pale face and hollow eyes, is quick on his feet and often gravitates towards acrobats at the most dangerous moment-as though ready to steal their souls should they make a fatal error. Quidam is a journey. It is the discovery that beauty-sublime and lyrical-lies deep within us all. Boum-Boum is played by Jason Papp.
- Claudio from Varekai -- This clown character has been years in the making. He reunites with Cal McCrystal (Comedy Director), the clown act creator with whom he worked for Varekai. Performed by Claudio Adalberto Carneiro
- Dislocation from Zumanity -- Presenting the only act of its kind at Cirque du Soleil, he has unparalleled ability to make dislocation a fascinating, enjoyable spectacle. Performed by Moukhtar Gusengadzhiev.
- Korean Plank from Mystere -- Acrobats jump and perform acrobatic poses on a plank that is mounted like a see-saw. Performed by Jeremy Brock, Serhy But, Paul Cameron, Marek Haczkiwicz, Vladislav Lissenkov, Dan Niehauss, Zdislaw Pelka, Grygoriy Shevchenko and Rustam Vahidov.
- Aerial Ballet in Silk from LaNouba -- Acrobat wraps and moves himself along the length of two cloths hanging from the ceiling. Performed by Iouri Mairov.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Dance (Acrobatic Solo on Crutches) -- Performed by Bill Shannon
- Dance -- Performed by Frank Luisi, Marvin Monestime, Johnny Walker Bien-Aimée and Jonas Napoléon
- Handbalancing on Canes -- Les 7 Doigts de la Main, Performed by Samuel Tétréault
- Juggling -- Performed by Vladik Miagkostoupov
- Magic (playing cards) -- Performed by Étienne Vendette

- Perch Poles – Khaylafov, Performed by Dmtry and Mikhail Kedychko, Alexander and Dmtri Khaylafov, Pavel Leonov, Andrei Saladonau and Danaiil Zanevskiy.
- Percussion – BEAT, Performed by Sylvain Coulombe, Robert Dethier, David Devine, Karim Diouf, Samuel Harrisson, Bruno Roy, Mathieu Toupin and Stéphane Tremblay

EPISODE REVIEW

Entitled "Wind of Freedom" the premise finds Boum-Boum from Quidam descending on a prison and inspiring inmates to escape via various fantastical means. The episode opens with a group of prisoners in an exercise yard. The solstrom inspires them to break out into an energetic dance/percussion session. The troupe is known as Beat and their performance draws inspiration from shows such as Bring in 'Da Noise Bring in 'Da Funk, Tap Dogs and Stomp. A new prisoner is brought in; lanky Varekai clown Claudio Carneiro. He plays a clichéd bumbling idiot character and seems to give a rather subdued performance without an audience's energy to feed him.

One young man placidly bounces a ball against a wall in a classic "prisoner" image. The solar wind inspires the young man, 19 year-old Vladik Miagkostoupov, to perform an energetic contact juggling act. He dances and writhes while juggling and manipulating up to seven balls. This young performer exhibits talent and skill reminiscent of Dralion's Viktor Kee.

Next, Troupe Khaylatov of the Great Moscow State Circus performs one of the most high-level acrobatic acts I've ever seen. One performer balances a 9.5 meter (approximately 30 foot) pole on his shoulder on top of which another performer is perched. They perform some skills similar to Chinese Poles performers, if the poles were simultaneously being balanced on the shoulders of porters. Though amazing, the uninspired presentation of the act makes it less than enthralling. Without the music, costumes, lighting, sets, choreography and drama usually present in Cirque du Soleil's live shows even this spectacular act seems dull. In the absence of artistic elements the act is just a meaningless bunch of tricks and despite the skill of the performers, I found that it dragged on and got tired quickly.

Claudio winds up in the prison infirmary. The patient in the adjacent bed is inspired by the solar wind to leap up and perform a dance on crutches. Bill Shannon is a New York dancer/choreographer who turned his reliance on crutches into a new form of dance. Inspired by hip-hop and break dance Bill perfected his "Shannon Technique" for dancing on crutches which, until Cirque commissioned him to choreograph a piece for Varekai, only he practiced. Bill is amazingly agile on the cumbersome crutches and performs moves that are far more advanced than his protégé in Varekai is capable of. But the performance in Solstrom is devoid of any deep evocative power since it is not presented in a dramatic context like it is in Varekai.

A short slight-of-hand card routine performed by magician Étienne Vendette follows. Claudio is then hauled to his cell which he shares with a strange fellow; Zumanity dislocation artist Mukhtar Gusengadzhiev. Mukhtar presents his human-pretzel bone-displacement dance which demonstrates his extreme flexibility.

We cut to an adjacent cell where one inmate wrangles loose the bars on his window, but before his escape Boum-Boum's puff of solstrom transforms the bars into balancing canes. The prisoner, played by former Alegria artist Samuel Tetreault, performs a hand-balancing act taken from his current show Les 7 doigts de la main.

Meanwhile a group assembles in the courtyard. One prisoner taunts Claudio by stamping down on one side of a bench and sending Claudio's shoe on the opposite end flying into the air. The solar wind turns the bench into a Korean Plank and the group members (from *Mystère*) propel each other higher and higher on the apparatus. I adored this act when presented in *Mystère* but in *Solstrom* the unimaginative costumes and bland music diminish its impact.

The episode closes with La Nouba performer Yuri Maiorov attempting a helicopter escape. He ties bed sheets to a rig lowered by a hovering chopper but before he makes his escape Boum-Boum's magic has him soaring across the prison yard performing an Aerial Ballet in Silk. I usually adore aerial silk acts; they are among my favorites in any show where they are featured. However, in the context of *Solstrom* they don't have the same evocative power. Whereas in the theatre the aerialists fly over the heads of the audience and evoke a sense of wonder and other-worldly awe, on television they simply don't have the same effect. Without the spatial reference of the theatre the viewer can't appreciate the act in the same way and unfortunately it becomes flat on screen.

/// EPISODE 4: “GHOSTLY WIND” (“DISGUISES”)

It is a dark, stormy night. The night watchman in a costume warehouse plays with paper dolls to pass the time. He is so absorbed that he does not notice the mysterious presence of the Âme Force from Dralion. As she sings, solar wind spreads throughout the warehouse and costumes come to life. Suddenly, there is a blackout and the warehouse is haunted by two mocking and quarrelsome ghosts! Strange, unexplainable things happen to the night watchman and the warehouse. Who will believe that he was hypnotised by ghosts, attended a real Brazilian fiesta, and even participated in a fashion show with top-model Naomi Campbell? He won't be able to explain but in the end he may not be the crazy one!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of The Âme Force from Dralion -- In Dralion's extraordinary voyage through a futuristic dimension-a place without time, ruled by magical laws-the voice of Dralion sings in an invented language to which only Cirque du Soleil holds the key. Its mysterious accents echo down through time. The Âme Force symbolizes ultimate harmony between the four elements: earth, air, fire and water.
- Aerial Contortion in Silk from Quidam -- Act developed by Chassé at the age of 20. Combining contortion and aerial silks, the acrobat winds and moves herself along the length of two cloths suspended from the ceiling. Performed by Isabelle Chassé.
- Ballet on Lights from Dralion -- Standing on pointe, acrobats perform hand-to-hand and contortion poses while balancing on light bulbs screwed into a special floor. Performed by Li Xiang, Ting Ting Miao, Cuicui Ren, Yu Zhong, Ying Lin, Leilei Luan and Hailing Huang.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Air and Silk Contortion -- Performed by Isabelle Chassé
- Brazilian Carnival -- Performed by 11 dancers choreographed by Marcelo Juarez Villa
- Contortion -- Performed by Vladimir Gagarine
- Flying Trapeze -- Performed by: Jill, Anthony and Willy Pages, Justin Chodkowski and Lazaro Miguel Fernandez
- Hula Hoops -- Performed by Elena Tselishtcheva
- Transformation -- Performed by David Maas and Dania Kaseeva

EPISODE REVIEW

"Ghostly Wind's" hackneyed storyline features some contrived nonsense about ghosts (Stephan Kreiss and Petra Massey) wreaking havoc on a costume warehouse and its night watchman (Aitor Basauri Barruetabena), causing a conflict between the security guard and his disbelieving supervisor (Toby Park). Regardless, the narrative structure is more of an obstruction to the show than a well thought-out context. All of the aforementioned actors are from the British comedy troupe Spymonkey currently featured in Zumanity, where their antics provide welcome comic relief. In Solstrom, however, their interstitial segues are nothing more than idle filler; they are completely unfunny and neither amusing nor intellectually engaging.

The solar wind character for this episode is Dralion's Âme Force played enchantingly by Cirque vocal coach and former performer Laur Fugère. This is perhaps the first instance in the entire series where a solar wind character is actually used effectively. Laur accentuates the music of the episode with her exotic vocalizations and plays the role with a coy, ethereal charm in her fleeting moments of screen time.

Without exception Solstrom's strongest acts are those taken directly from the live stage shows of the Cirque du Soleil. "Ghostly Wind" opens powerfully with Isabelle Chassé's Aerial Contortion in Silk from Quidam. This being one of my all-time favourite Cirque du Soleil acts I was very apprehensive about seeing it featured in Solstrom, as I was almost certain its presentation would somehow be butchered. Gladly, save for a few annoying cuts to the clown character and one intrusive and completely unnecessary interjection from good ol' Fogus Punch (the mad scientist/narrator character), the act remains intact and is accompanied by Laur's stirring rendition of "Let Me Fall" Skill for skill and moment for moment the Aerial Contortion act is almost exactly the same as when it was filmed for the Quidam DVD. Though the camera work and cinematography for this particular act is the best ever featured in Solstrom it comes nowhere near the level of the masterful and evocative filming of Quidam Live in Amsterdam five years ago.

Later in the show the second adapted act is presented; Dralion's Ballet on Lights. Whereas the featured act from Quidam is performed almost identically to its previous filming, the Ballet on Lights act from Dralion is very different. Since the filming of Dralion in 2000 this act, where dancers perform en pointe on an array of light bulbs, has undergone a complete makeover. The costumes are different, the choreography has changed and the skills are dramatically improved. The difficulty level of the skills; towers, balancing and contortion, is heightened. The act is now quite spectacular. Being one of Dralion's few truly innovative acts it is fortunate that this new incarnation gets its turn to shine in front of the lens.

Of the non-Cirque acts the standout of this episode is the contortion number presented by Vladimir Gagarine from the Academy of Tula. Presenting an act he refined for the 2003 edition of the Piste aux Espoirs international festival for circus artists, the young Russian gracefully contorts his flexible body into many exotic figures. The act is presented with a middle-eastern flavour in its music, costume treatment and style of movement, and with its artistry it is truer in form to Cirque du Soleil. It presents contortion in an artistic context instead of mindlessly going for the shock value and gross-out factor of some of Solstrom's previous contortion acts.

The remainder of this episode's acts never attain this level of refined artistry. Transformation is a magic act featuring David Maas and Dania Kaseeva. Dania almost instantly changes costumes before our eyes a total of 10 times in the three-minute act. Though I'm sure this act is impressive live on stage, in the day and age of digital effects the grandeur of the illusion fails to register on television.

The cute Elena Tselishtcheva of the Great Moscow State Circus performs a Hoops act. The performer whirls a myriad of hula-hoops around her body, keeping several going at once. This act is similar to the one performed by Elena Lev of Alegría and Quidam fame minus the choreography, contortion and rhythmic gymnastic elements.

There is a very brief interlude featuring a troupe of dancers, choreographed by Marcelo Juarez Villa, creating a scene from a Brazilian Carnivale. True to the spirit of Carnivale this number is largely free-style and unstructured.

The Flying Pages, an acrobatic family, closes the episode with a flying trapeze number. Though the performers are talented the act is nothing we haven't seen before in dozens of other circus shows and comes off as blasé without any special music, choreography or costume treatment.

Somewhere along the way supermodel (and rumored apple of Cirque Co-Founder Guy Laliberté's eye) Naomi Campbell makes a completely superfluous cameo in a mock fashion show.

/// EPISODE 5: “WINDS OF COURAGE” (“THE GAMES”)

Patrick, a professional armchair athlete, is settling down for a loooong evening watching television in his basement apartment. Suddenly, his television set bursts into flames. As he is putting out the small fire, his arm gets stuck in the set. Then, gradually, his whole body gets sucked into the television! He now finds himself in another world, where high-level sporting events are taking place. When the Gentle Giant from the production “O” blows solar wind on the site, the sporting events and the customary decorum alter course radically: the course of solar wind! Comedians Colin Mochrie and Yvan Ponton, Olympic athletes Sylvie Fréchette (synchro swimming), Sébastien Lareau (tennis) and Émilie Heymans (diving), will have never experienced anything like it!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of The Gentle Giant from O -- Just as water is essential to all life forms, the show "O" symbolizes the cycle of life. In this odyssey where everything takes place in or above water, the Gentle Giant can be seen as the guardian of each emerging world-strong man, a organ grinder, a guileless giant, he is ever willing to be helpful. The Gentle Giant is played by Didier Antoine.
- Human Torch from O --This artist holds the (unratified) world record for staying on fire for the longest time: two minutes. Performed by Ray Wold.
- Fire from O -- Dance and fire manipulation in the traditional Polynesian style. Performed by Fua'an "Junior" Faitau and Steven Silulu.
- Hand-to-Hand from Mystere -- Acrobatic act combining still poses and feats of elevation and balance, performed by two or more artists. Performed by Jarowlaw “Yarek” Marciniak and Dariusz "Darek" Wronski.
- Floor Hoops from Alegria -- This young artist manipulates a ribbon while performing contortions with hoops. Performed by Maria Silaeva.
- Water Meteors from Varekai -- Trio of child performers manipulate a long rope with small bowls at each end, traditionally filled with water. Performed by Bin He, Siguang Li and Junping Yan.
- Juggling from Varekai -- This talented performer juggles balls, ping-pong balls and panama hats. Performed by Octavio Alegria.
- Tightrope from La Nouba -- Performed by Igor Arefiev Sr.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Acrobatics/Leaps -- Les 7 Doigts de la Main, Performed by Patrick Léonard
- Aerial Straps -- Performed by Roman Tomanov
- Chinese Poles -- Performed by Paul Herzfeld, Darin Inkster and Sébastien Tardif
- Comedy Trampoline -- Atrium Arts Pty. Ltd., Performed by Matt Hugues, the rebound acrobat
- Kung fu Clowns -- Krasky Vostoka. Performed by Azimov Choukhratbek, Dmitrii Khamzin, Abdoullaev Khamdam, Abdoullaev Mourat and Ulugbek Raimdjanov
- Spanish Web -- Performed by Marina Bouglione

EPISODE REVIEW

"Winds of Courage" features the largest number of acts in a Solstrom episode yet (a total of 13). Unfortunately that doesn't mean more bang for your buck, it just means more of what we don't want and less of what we do. Thematically the episode is an incoherent mess and the production values are so cheap they are constantly distracting. I simply can't enjoy the show because it looks so amateurish and silly. The costumes are beyond drab and I've seen more impressive sets for bad high school plays. For the non-Cirque acts there is no choreography to speak of and the filming is flat and uninspired. The one semi-creative aspect for this episode is the music composed by Phillippe Leduc, Mathieu Vanisse and Jean-Charles Desjardins. It is a mostly-electronic score that alternates between esoteric and video-gameish. While not spectacular it's just not as bad as the other elements of the show. For once I agreed with Fogus Punch when he said "This is degenerating into a cartoon." Though I doubt the line was intended to be self-referential.

The episode features the spasmodic Patrick Léonard from the Cirque spin-off troupe Les 7 Doigts de la Main as an arm-chair sports fanatic who gets sucked through his television set into a comic book version of the Olympics presided over by the Gentle Giant from "O" (Didier Antoine). It would seem natural that Cirque would want to pay tribute to the Olympics and to sports in general but this episode is more of a mockery. Speaking of "Mochries" fans of Canadian improv comedian Colin Mochrie of *Whose Line is it Anyway* will be disappointed to learn that his much touted "cameo" translates into a mere 15 seconds of screen time where he wasn't allowed to do anything but mumble gibberish at the camera as a sportscaster. What a waste of talent! Another oversight; Montreal has an authentic Olympic Stadium, The Big 'O', a relic of the 1976 Games. It would have been so easy to film the episode on location to gain a sense of authenticity instead of using a budget set in a TV studio, which underlines the episode's artifice.

"Winds of Courage" starts off encouragingly enough with strong performances by Polynesian Fire Knife dancers Fua'an Faitau and Steven Silulu and Human Torch Ray Wold (all from "O"). A blink-and-you-miss-it Spanish Web performance by Marina Bouglione (only one or two skills) is followed by La Nouba's Igor Arefiev Sr. who performs a tightrope routine on a tennis net to a Mission Impossible-style score.

This act, along with the remainder of the acts adapted from the live Cirque shows, are so horribly misplaced, abridged and altered they are effectively ruined. Juggling by Varekai's Octavio Alegria just isn't as exciting or impressive without the energy of an audience. Why would they change an act as powerful as *Mystère's* Hand to Hand (a new routine performed by Jarowlaw "Yarek" Marciniak and Dariusz "Darek" Wronski) with its evocative staging and haunting score and reduce it to a ridiculous wrestling match? Varekai's Water Meteors (Bin He, Siguang Li, Junping Yan) and Alegria's Manipulation (Maria Silaeva) acts are cut down to a fraction of their full length (Maria doesn't even get to perform the ribbon portion of her rhythmic gymnastic act) and placed in the hokey context of a medals ceremony. My advice to Solstrom's production team; if you're going to take acts from Cirque's live shows, don't alter them! You'll never improve on what was originally created and you're devaluing them by putting them into these contrived story lines.

Of the non-Cirque acts featured the highlight of this episode is a remarkable aerial straps performance by 16-year-old Roman Tomanov. Already a highly skilled gymnast and aerialist, his performance evoked images of the aerial routines performed by Anton Chelnokov, Alexandr Dobrynin and the Atherton Twins, all of whom this young performer can give a run for their money. While already technically impressive, Roman's act has the potential to be sublime if properly costumed, choreographed and scored by Cirque for a live show.

The remainder of the acts are of the slapstick physical comedy variety of which there is entirely too much in this episode. Pat Léonard performs part of his "stair dance" on a large foam pillow, the act is so much more amusing in the context of 7 Doigts where it opens the show and sets the spontaneous and irreverent tone for the live performance. In Solstrom it just comes off as childish. Matt Hugues, "the rebound acrobat" from Circus Oz, invades a diving competition to perform his juvenile "comedy trampoline" act. And Azimov Choukhratbek, Dmitrii Khamzin, Abdoullaev Khamdam, Abdoullaev Mourat and Ulugbek Raimdjanova, a group known as Kung Fu Clowns perform an asinine mock martial arts display.

Not soon enough, the episode concludes when three Chinese Pole Acrobats (Paul Herzfeld, Darin Inkster, Sébastien Tardif) scamper up the poles and become human flags.

/// EPISODE 6: “HOWLING WINDS” (“GOTHIC”)

Two zebras from the show “O” blow solar wind into a decrepit hotel, transforming it into a strange gothic manor where curious phenomena occur. As the hotel proprietor looks on, inanimate objects are brought to life. Death itself is among the hotel guests, all of whom engage in schemes that appear unusual: one guest eats a salad bowl, while a young bride acts as if she were a bat and her husband follows a ghostly seductress. The proprietor doesn’t seem to mind the bizarre behavior of his staff: the head waiter is growing canine teeth, the waitresses’ unruly conduct, and the loud music in the restaurant, etc. He has not even noticed that the bellboy has grown to such an extent that his head has disappeared from view. In fact, the only thing that troubles him is all the hair growing on his body, making him resemble a... werewolf!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life The Zebras from O -- Plunged into the wonder, terror and joy of "O", the zebras struggle to maintain balance in a stormy universe. They constantly realign themselves, hanging on until the very end. Their entire number takes place suspended in mid-air. Resembling a playground jungle gym, the giant aerial frame they use was created by Cirque du Soleil specialists to facilitate choreography and gymnastics in an aerial space between the sky and the water.
- Juggling from Dralion -- This veteran of several international festivals was awarded a Clown d’Argent at the 27th Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo. Performed by Viktor Kee
- Slackwire from Mystere -- This father and son duo "balances" comedy and acrobatic skill. Performed by Brian and Nicky Dewhurst.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Clowns (turbulent waitresses) -- Performed by Adriana Duch and Alba and Dominguez Mora.
- Hand-to-Hand (Duo Iouvilov) -- Performed by Ernest Iouvilov and Samantha Larible Iouvilov.
- Slackwire -- Performed by Nicolette Hazewinkel.
- Spanish Web -- Performed by Jason Papp.
- Static Trapeze -- Les 7 Doigts de la Main, Performed by Shana Carroll.
- Swallowing (various objects) -- Performed by Stevie Starr.

EPISODE REVIEW

When Cirque du Soleil set out to re-invent the tired, old, traditional circus the company's main asset, besides its youth and gusto, was its originality. Cirque has a reputation for blending circus with high artistic concepts to produce an original form of entertainment. Sadly, this concept seems to have been abandoned for Solstrom. At the mid-way point of the series we have an episode entitled "Howling Winds" that is completely trite, unoriginal and kitschy.

The script of the episode finds a newlywed couple (Mystère's Nicky Dewhurst and Shana Carroll from *Les 7 doigts de la main*) checking into a hotel on their wedding night. Two Zebra characters from "O" use the solar wind to transform the hotel into a gothic manor filled with about every tired Halloween cliché you could ever think of, presented in such a campy style viewers will groan and roll their eyes. The overall look and feel is of a bad amusement park fun house. The ideas are hackneyed, the pacing is slow and the music (by FM Le Sieur and mixed by François Arbour) is electronic and average.

The episode does have a few assets. An appearance by Mystère's Brian Dewhurst as the hotel's owner is welcome although he doesn't get to do much. For the most part the collection of featured circus acts in this episode is above average. The show opens with Dralion's Viktor Kee performing his contact juggling routine. The act is presented in its entirety and with its original music, but the presentation is dulled with the absence of Azala the Goddess of Air floating above to pass the balls, and by the addition of a cheap wavy distortion video effect.

Jason Papp of Quidam returns to Solstrom to perform a brief Spanish Web act. He plays a spider but the costume's black leather suit and mask make the performer look like he belongs in a fetish club. Hmm, did someone say "Zumanity"? Nicolette Hazewinkel returns as a ghost who lures Nicky Dewhurst to the hotel lobby where she walks across a tightrope while wearing high-heeled shoes. Nicky Dewhurst, of course, follows the apparition and scampers across the wire himself to perform a routine adapted from his act in *Nouvelle Expérience*. It's nice to revisit a classic Cirque act though sadly Brian Dewhurst does not perform his comedic portion of the slack wire routine. Ernest Louvilov and Samantha Larible Louvilov appear to the new bride and perform a hand-to-hand acrobatic pas de deux. Though the pair is talented the presentation of the act isn't anything exciting; average costumes, un-involving score and minimal choreography.

The episode also has a couple of asinine offerings. Throwing away any pretense of good taste, Stevie Starr performs a grotesque act where he swallows and regurgitates various objects such as an 8-ball, a candle and a light bulb. The act made me cringe for several reasons and wonder if this is the kind of lowball sideshow that passes for entertainment nowadays. Later, two waitresses played by Adriana Duch and Alba Dominguez Mora get into a WWE-style wrestling match. This act is much too violent for Solstrom's intended audience of very young children and much too stupid to be enjoyed by the rest of us.

Thankfully, the episode closes on a high note with Shana Carroll performing her beautiful static trapeze number from *Les 7 Doigts de la Main*. Her performance would have actually been affecting if it weren't placed in such a goofy context. But the same can be said of many of Solstrom's acts.

/// EPISODE 7: "TWIN WINDS" ("DOUBLE")

A vain man enters his bathroom acting as if he were a celebrity. Admiring himself in the mirror, Narcissus Janeiro performs his usual rituals of body care and self-love. Then, two Nuts from the show La Nouba secretly sneak up to his mirror and blow solar wind into it. Narcissus can no longer see his reflection in the mirror. Intrigued, he climbs onto the sink, approaches the mirror and falls through to the other side! He is plunged into a universe of the absurd on the other side of the mirror. The setting in which he now finds himself is a caricature of his own bathroom, but he is not alone: he is surrounded by pairs of identical twins. It is the beginning of a crazy adventure in which the vain man attempts to find his lost reflection and to escape from this repetitive, dreamlike universe inhabited by pairs, each one more curious than the next.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of The Nuts from La Nouba --La Nouba is an unforgettable journey through our universe-at once threatening and exhilarating, frightening and familiar. Inspired by the Pierrot clown, the nuts are dressed in white, to signify their naïve and innocent character. They are neither performers in the show, nor spectators. They are mischievous characters that exist between our reality and the reality of La Nouba. The Nuts are played by Pawel Biegaj and Witek Biegaj.
- Icarian Games from Varekai -- One performer lies back on a platform and uses his feet to juggle another person, who executes various poses. Performed by the Rampin Brothers: Javier, Pedro and Ramon Santos
- Boleadoras from Saltimbanco -- Dancers create rhythms by tapping their feet and striking the ground with pairs of long, stone-tipped ropes, or "bolas."
- Performed by H  l  ne Lemay and Ann Bernard.
- Aerial Straps from Varekai --Gymnasts roll up and down two parallel hanging straps that are several yards long. Performed by Andrew and Kevin Atherton.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Bubbles -- Fan Yang - The Science of Bubbles. Performed by Ana, Deni, Fan, and Melody Yang.
- Dancing Nose -- Performed by Charlie Schmidt.
- Diabolo -- Les 7 Doigts de la Main. Performed by Patrick L  onard and S  bastien Soldevila.
- Hand-to-Hand – Azal  . Performed by Julie Lavergne and   rika Lemay.
- Hand-to-Hand -- Performed by Danil and Victor Kaloutskikh.
- Juggling -- Double Trouble
- Performed by Alex and Nick Karvounis.

EPISODE REVIEW

After a string of bad episodes comes "Twin Winds," actually one of Solstrom's better offerings. Bear in mind when talking about Solstrom that isn't saying much; the production values are still low and the artistic integration an afterthought, but this installment is decidedly less ludicrous than the previous few and feels slightly fresher. This is perhaps a credit to a new director; "Twin Winds" is the first episode directed by Mario Rouleau. This episode features a strong array of performances and music by Michel Cusson, which is reminiscent of the urban, world-music stylings of Saltimbanco's score.

In this episode Sébastien Soldevila of Les 7 Doigts de la Main plays Narcissus Janeiro, a wealthy and vain Brazilian media magnate. During Narcissus' morning routine two Nuts from La Nouba blow solar wind into his mirror and change the vain man's reflection to one which is decidedly less ruggedly handsome (Patrick Léonard, also of 7 Doigts, plays the reflection). Narcissus follows his reflection through the mirror and enters a bizarre world of pairs played by various sets of twins and look-alike couples. He spends the episode wandering through this strange world and witnessing performances by the different duos. I appreciate the fact that the premise of this week's episode is a simple take on Lewis Carroll's "Alice Through the Looking Glass" and does not attempt to alter the featured acts to fit into the story, something the series has always done poorly.

However, one absolutely inexcusable oversight that must be pointed out is that the episode did not feature the duo trapeze performance of Karyn and Sarah Steben, perhaps the most breathtaking twin act ever featured in a Cirque show. Nor did they feature either set of twins that replaced the Stebens in Saltimbanco and "O". Though the episode features some noteworthy performances, to a true Cirque fan it will be forever incomplete with the glaring absence of the Stebens.

The first featured act is a breathtaking duo contortion act by Danil and Victor Kaloutskikh, twin brothers who can't be more than 9 years old. The pair performs a stunning and graceful contortion/hand-balancing act very similar to the duo contortion act originally performed by the two young Mongolian girls in Alegría. This act is one of the very rare instances when Solstrom features a non-Cirque act with music, choreography, costumes and performance quality worthy of Cirque du Soleil.

Icarian Games from Varekai follows, or rather a short, alternate version of the act featuring only the Rampin Brothers (Javier, Pedro and Ramon Santos). This number is so much more thrilling live on stage in the context of Varekai. It really loses something in the translation to television.

Next, a group called Fan Yang (Ana, Deni, Fan, and Melody Yang) performs a moderately interesting if unspectacular act called The Science of Bubbles where the family blows soap bubbles in various shapes, some filled with smoke, to make bubble sculptures. The group is also capable of making bubbles large enough for a person to fit inside and has apparently won seven Guinness World Record titles for doing so.

Narcissus then happens upon a pair of women performing a beautiful and highly sensual hand-to-hand number. Julie Lavergne and Érika Lemay, known as "Azalé," perform in Cirque Éos. The artistic elements of their number are definitely done in the Cirque style but the presentation isn't as high-calibre as Cirque du Soleil. Regardless, the act is performed beautifully and is a welcome addition to Solstrom.

An asinine comedy bit follows; Charlie Schmidt presses his nose up against a pane of glass so he can make it "dance" to music. This might have been amusing when I was five years old but now it just comes off as stupid. Mercifully, this number is very short.

Saltimbanco's brilliant Boleadoras act follows. This is an original performance in which Héléne Lemay and Ann Bernard blend the bolas (small weights on elastics that make a loud percussive sound when they strike the floor) with flamenco into a unique dance/percussion number I loved this number when I saw it live in Saltimbanco, however in Solstrom it is shortened and the filming leaves much to be desired. The majority of the shots feature the performers' upper bodies when all of the action is happening on the ground.

Alex and Nick Karvounis, a pair known as "Double Trouble" perform a standard juggling act with balls, clubs and flaming torches. There isn't much when it comes to the presentation but the routine itself is mildly amusing.

The Atherton Twins (Kevin and Andrew) perform their breathtaking Aerial Straps number from Varekai. The act is mostly intact and mostly unaltered though the sheer exhilaration of the aerial act doesn't come across on screen like it does under the Grand Chapiteau. I did enjoy the alternate version of the act's accompanying song "El Pendulo" featuring Laur Fugère and some more advanced skills that haven't been seen before, such as a spectacular single hand balance in mid-air as the act's finale.

The episode closes with Sebastien and Patrick performing their show-stopping Diabolo tumbling routine from 7 Doigts. Again, the energy of the act is much better in front of a live audience, but the skills are all there and the number provides the episode with an adequate finale.

/// EPISODE 8: “WINDS FROM THE PAST” (“CHILDHOOD”)

Feeling lazy, the Dreamer from the show Saltimbanco climbs into a cluttered attic, planning to take a little nap. He makes so much noise clumsily knocking around that Old Max comes up to see what is going on. He finds nothing abnormal about his attic... only that Eddie, the character from his jack-in-the-box, is standing beside him in flesh and blood. Solar wind and the Dreamer have clearly been at work. Soon after, Old Max and Eddie literally jump into the toy box after getting acquainted. At the bottom, the old man gets the surprise of his life: he has become a child once again! The toy box is the setting of several encounters. They meet a suspicious bicycle salesman, a powerful warden of a fortified castle, a multitude of highly talented children, an electronic knight and two individuals whom Old Max knows very, very well.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of The Dreamer from Saltimbanco -- Saltimbanco is magical, electric, overwhelming. The show breathes energy, yet from the moment he appears, the Dreamer falls asleep. When he does, amazing tableaux take shape. Has he conjured Saltimbanco from the depths of his imagination, or is he dreaming within the show? The Dreamer is played by Guennadi Tchijov.
- Adagio from Saltimbanco -- This breathtaking act is performed by three members of the same family — father, mother and son. Performed by: Andreiy Vintilov, Maxsim Vintilov and Oxana Vintilova.
- Bungee from Saltimbanco -- With bungee cords attached to their hips, four acrobats fly through the air performing acrobatic moves. Performed by Dmitri Beliaikov, Nico Karsdorf, Valeriy Kharun, Nicolle Liquorish, Edi Moreno Barata, Vitalii Redoun, Michael Rosenberger and Carolyne Vita.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Acrobatic Ball -- Performed by Louis-Marc Bruneau-Dumoulin.
- Artistic Cycling -- Performed by Justin Case.
- BMX Biking / Inline Skating with Ramp -- Performed by: Pascal Boucher, Vincent Daniel, Charles Deschamps and Julien Deschamps.
- Fire Eating -- Performed by Ronald Gagné.
- German Wheel -- Performed by Chloé St-Jean-Richard.
- Juggling (balls) -- Performed by Bruno Gagnon.
- Poses Plastiques (hand-to-hand and contortion) -- Trio Shulekine: Margarita Baranova, Marina Chernysheva and Loulia Kossolapova.
- Ribbon -- Performed by Anastasia and Alexandra Fomina.
- Skipping Ropes -- Performed by: Renée Bibeau, Jeffery Mauss, Lyndsey Mayer, Jason Papp, Faon Shane and Nick Woodard.
- Slackwire -- Performed by Slava Chabanenko.
- Trampoline -- Performed by Alain Gauthier.

EPISODE REVIEW

The inconsequential story finds The Dreamer from Saltimbanco (Guennadi Tchijov) climbing into an old mans attic to find a place to sleep. He crawls into a crib and with a puff of solar wind transforms the overhead mobile into an aerial ballet. The Bungee Ballet was by far my favourite act when I saw it performed live in Saltimbanco, the vision of majestic white birds soaring across the sky and the overwhelming awe and exhilaration that the act conveys was nothing short of magical. None of that magic is conveyed on screen in Solstrom. Taken out of context, the act is still beautiful but short of sublime.

When the Sleeper causes a commotion, the Old Man investigates and soon happens upon Eddie (Jesko Von Den Steinen, also of Saltimbanco) who serves as a Peter Pan figure. Eddie leads the Old Man through his toy chest into a very low-budget looking Never Never Land. The Old Man has become a boy again (gee, I never saw that one coming) and together Eddie and the Boy (Saltimbanco's Maxim Vintilov) venture through this goofy and chaotic world out of a child's imagination. . .or at least out of the imaginations of the producers of a low-budget TV show for pre-schoolers.

Along the way the pair encounters a group on BMX bikes and in-line skates (Pascal Boucher, Vincent Daniel, Charles Deschamps, Julien Deschamps), a bicycle salesman (Justin Case) who performs a goofy trick cycling act, a fire eater (Ronald Gagné), a juggler (Bruno Gagnon), a little girl masterfully manipulating a full-size German Wheel (Chloé St-Jean-Richard), another child scampering along on an acrobatic ball (Louis-Marc Bruneau-Dumoulin) and little girls performing rhythmic gymnastics with ribbons (Anastasia Fomina, Alexandra Fomina). All of these "acts" are really just brief glimpses of one or two tricks, no thought whatsoever is given to their presentation.

Margarita Baranova, Marina Chernysheva and Loulia Kossolapova, the "Trio Shulekine" perform a hand-to-hand/contortion number for which they won the Bronze medal at the 2003 L'Avenir de Cirque de Demain festival. Slava Chabanenko performs an impressive slack wire act. Again, these young performers show a great deal of raw talent but the presentation of the acts is overlooked, and consequently they become tedious.

Renée Bibeau, Jason Papp, Faon Shane, Jeffery Mauss, Lyndsey Mayer and Nick Woodard perform an impressive acrobatic skipping rope number to a bad disco score. The former three artists are Quidam alumni, the latter three are World Junior Skipping Champions.

Alain Gauthier becomes a human video game character by performing on a trampoline. The routine is standard, but you have to give the producers points for trying to present this act in a fun context. Unfortunately the act is too long and becomes boring quite quickly.

Another Saltimbanco act book-ends the episode, the beautiful Adagio Trio performed by Andreiy Vintilov, Maxim Vintilov and Oxana Vintilova. I've seen this number performed by three different families and each brings its own unique style to the act. The Vintilovs' act is quite spectacular and is easily the highlight of an otherwise dreadful episode.

/// EPISODE 9: “WIND OF ROMANCE” (“ROMANCE”)

The setting is a quaint Italian town square, perfect for the flourishing of love stories. Fiona, one of the Baroques from the show Salitbanco blows solar wind onto the inhabitants, onlookers and café clients, making their hearts go pitter-patter. Claudio is no exception. He is madly in love with Juliet, who in turn loves Romeo. This does not stop Mooky, Juliet’s neighbour, from seducing her beloved one, Claudio! Fiona’s solar wind makes the love in the air extraordinarily potent: Romeo crosses a clothesline to reach his beloved Juliet; lost lovers are reunited; Colombine descends from her poster to join a handsome acrobatic suitor; lovers experience the joys of reconciliation. Stories of romance are everywhere. Lovebirds are embracing and dancing all over the town square, while other couples are so smitten they are floating on air.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of Fiona from Saltimbanco -- Fiona is a member of Saltimbanco's Baroque family. The Baroques sleep under bridges and emerge to celebrate life. Defiant, rebellious, explosive, they are enlightened beings whose free spirits run wild. The Baroques are eccentric and electric. They light up the world with their infectious energy and celebrate life with their every movement. The stage is their giant playground. Fiona is played by Andrea Conway.
- Tightwire from La Nouba -- Performed by Jade Kindar-Martin and Karine Mauffrey.
- Fire-Human Torch from O -- He is the human torch world record holder (unratified), having remained alight for two full minutes. Performed by Ray Wold.
- Comedy, Claudio and Mooky from Varekai -- Enjoy this much-loved clown duet from Varekai. Performed by Claudio Adalberto Carneiro and Kathleen Helen Cornish
- Aerial Pas De Deux from Dralion -- Acrobats roll and move themselves along the length of two cloths suspended from the ceiling. Performed by Igor Arefiev and Colette Elizabeth Morrow.
- Balancing On Chairs from LaNouba -- Art of holding the body in unusual positions while balancing on a column of chairs. Performed by Rokardy.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Acrobatic Juggling --Duo Bodarenko, Performed by Olexandra and Vladyslav Bondarenko.
- Adagio on Unicycle -- Performed by Iuri Chavro and Diana Alechlchenko.
- Balancing Act on Slippery Surface -- Performed by Anatoliy Zalevskyy.
- Fantasy-Music on Glasses -- Performed by Michel Lauzière.

EPISODE REVIEW

"Wind of Romance" is a slow-paced and bland homage to love clichés. Overall the episode is more tolerable than some of its downright awful predecessors, but it still fails to engage the audience and in the end is nothing more than mindless fluff set to Miklos' score of Italian elevator music.

This episode finds Fiona, one of the Baroques from Saltimbanco (Andrea Conway) inspiring love in an Italian piazza by blowing the magical solstrom at various couples with predictable results. First, Romeo rides a bicycle across a tightwire strung over the piazza to reach his Juliet. Jade Kindar-Martin and Karine Mauffrey of La Nouba play the two overused Shakespearean archetypes.

Claudio Carneiro is also after Juliet's affections but Mooky Cornish is after his. As expected the two Varekai clowns assume their usual roles of bumbling idiot and boy-crazed girl. At one point the two perform their "magic" act from Varekai with Claudio dressed like Liberace.

When flicking aside a cigarette Claudio inadvertently sets a man reading the paper on fire. Ray Wold of "O" performs his "human torch" act . . . again; we've already seen his act featured in another Solstrom episode.

The stand-out performance in this episode is called Balancing Act on Slippery Surface. It is essentially a one-man Body Skating performance by Anatoliy Zalevskyy. The performer slides, spins and performs balancing figures on the slippery mat. The performance is graceful and understated. This act was the recipient of a Golden Clown at the 1999 Circus Festival of Monte Carlo.

The rest of the episode's acts are passable but banal. As usual, the presentation isn't very effective and the production is cheaply done. Olexandra and Vladyslav Bondarenko perform a contact juggling/adagio act, Iuri Chavro and Diana Alechlchenko perform an adagio on a unicycle, Rokardy of La Nouba performs an altered version of his Balancing on Chairs, Michel Lauzière makes another appearance to perform a symphony on vibrating wine glasses, and Igor Arefiev and Colette Elizabeth Morrow perform their Aerial Pas de Deux from Dralion.

The episode closes with the Trampoline and Wall performance that is adapted from La Nouba's finale. The performers are exceptionally talented but taken out of context the performance is lacking.

/// EPISODE 10: “GONE WITH THE WINDS” (“TRAVELING”)

Exposed to solar wind, an airport employee suddenly finds herself at the edge of the American desert. She is excited by this opportunity to hitchhike her way to adventure. She won't be disappointed, since the Aviator from the production Quidam, the Lizard from Varekai and the Comet from "O" all take it upon themselves to ensure that her journey across the desert will be extraordinary! Neither heat, nor thirst nor fatigue will prevent her from taking part in many encounters and facing adventures that are often absurd. During her travels, she will fear for her life, ride a scooter and be the object of seduction on more than one occasion. She will meet an astronaut, the entire crew of a cruise ship as well as the Formula 1 driver, David Coulthard.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of The Aviator from Quidam -- Just like the other Quidam characters who are obsessed with futile preoccupations, trying to fill the void of their existence, the Aviator has skeletal wings, but doesn't look quite ready to take off. Perhaps he doesn't know he has wings. Perhaps he knows, but can't fly. Perhaps, like Icarus, he has tried and failed. Or perhaps he simply wants to escape this world and its problems. The Aviator is played by Jason Papp.
- Flight of Icarus from Varekai -- In a net suspended above the ground, an acrobat performs poses requiring flexibility and agility. Performed by Anton Chelnokov.

GUEST ARTISTS

- The Art of Movement -- Les Yamakasi. Performed by Williams Belle, Yann Hnautra, Laurent Piemontesi, Sericka Kingmen and Sami Saula
- Contortion -- Performed by Natalia Vasylyuk.
- Dance on Stilts -- Performed by Odious Odell Knight III.
- Icarian Games -- The Kourbanov. Performed by Alexandre Kourbanov, Yulia Kurbanova, Evgueni Bogdanov, Ivan Issaev and Dmytro Taratutenko
- Irish Folk Dance -- Blackthorn Dancers. Performed by Leah M. Densmore, Sinead Green, Beth C., Erin M. and Rae D. MacNeil, Sarah L. Mallon, Nicola McEwan, Aisling A. and Dierdre B. Porter and Shannon Quin
- German Wheel -- Performed by Chris Robert Lashua.
- Lasso -- Performed by Angelo Iodice/A.J. Sylver.
- Slackwire -- Performed by Fan Zhang.

/// EPISODE 11: “WINDS OF IMAGINATION” (“CONSTRUCTION”)

A small boy is playing very seriously in a sandbox. To amuse the youngster, the Guide from the show Varekai uses solar wind to lift him to the top of a building under construction, with workmen all around. The child also meets the architect and the two become fast friends. Thanks to the Guide's solar wind antics, the building site is a place where the rules of construction and logic are not always respected, or even necessary! What would the boss say if he saw the workmen chasing each other around and finding refuge in the building's pipes? Or the power line technician behaving like he was on Broadway? Even the architect is affected and draws ridiculous blueprints that the foreman tries to follow! The workmen sing and dance while on the job... Who, in fact, is in charge of this very peculiar construction site? Perhaps it's not the one we suspect.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of the Guide from Varekai -- Wherever the wind carries the show Varekai, Rodrigue guides Icarus throughout his odyssey in the strange forest. He is in turn the spectre of the injured angel, the provocative sorcerer, the tamer of shadows, the guardian of fire, and the Skywatcher's accomplice in the young man's rebirth. Deep within a forest, at the summit of a volcano, exists an extraordinary world-a world where something else is possible. A world called Varekai. The Guide is played by Brad Denys.
- Russian Bars from Alegria -- Flyers perform balancing acts on or summersaults from a bar perched on the sturdy shoulders of powerful bearers. Performed by Performed by: Victor Bryndine, Aliaksei Liubezny, Oleksii Poletaiev, Ivan Saveliev, Anatoli Baravikou, Marcos De Oliveira Casuo, Tamir Erdenesaikhan, Victor Moiseev, Oleg Plotnikov, Viatcheslav Volkov and Myro Khetaguri
- Aerial Cube from Mystere -- A tube-like cube is suspended and the artist performs acrobatic poses. Performed by Paul Bowler.
- Chinese Poles -- Performed by Christian Durocher.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Dance (Zeugma, Collective of Urban Folklore) -- Performed by: Éric Vincent Carrié, Dominic Desrochers, Karine Hippolyte, Émilie Macot, Josée Mayrand, Sylvie Mercier, Julie Nolet, Christian Robert, Frédérique-Annie Robitaille, Carolyne Roy and Anita Rudichuk.
- Fantasy -- Performed by Valentin Urse.
- Hand-to-Hand (Acrofolie) -- Performed by Frédéric Arsenault and Martin Laliberté.
- Juggling (Favored Nations) -- Performed by Michael Moschen.
- Rola Bola -- Performed by Victor Dodonov.
- Triple Rope -- Performed by Brigitte Scherrer.
- Wheel -- Performed by Mr. Pi (Brad Denys).

/// EPISODE 12: “WIND OF LIFE” (“PUPPETS”)

*A craftsman is bustling about his charming toy store on a snowy Christmas Eve in Salzburg. This imaginative and passionate man has only one ambition: that his small wooden puppet comes to life. In fact, he acts as if it were already the case. The back room of the shop is set up to celebrate the marionette’s birthday. The puppet even has a birthday hat on his head! Crouched in a corner of the workshop, Vénus, one of the giants from the show *Mystère*, is watching the scene and she decides to assist by blowing solar wind. The toys in the shop receive their share of the giant’s solar spell, but the magic wind also spreads out in unexpected directions. Although she only intended to give life to the craftsman’s wooden son, Vénus gets much more than she bargained for.*

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- The Other Life of Venus from *Mystère* -- Venus is the female counterpart to the male, devilish, dark character Mephisto. In *Mystère*'s voyage from the dawn of time, Mephisto and Venus appear from the depths of the Earth; together they cast a long dark shadow and expose the sombre, more complex side of the journey of life. Mephisto and Venus only appear in times of commotion and loud noise; their presence wreaks havoc in any domain. Together they want to create chaos and destroy the amicable balance that exists within the world of *Mystère*. Venus is played by Rosalie Éthier.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Aerial Straps -- Cirque Éloize, Performed by Nicolas Roche
- Body Puppets -- Performed by Laura Kibel
- Contortion -- Performed by Jinny Jessica Jacinto
- Contortion in Cylinders -- Long Twins, Performed by Bing and Jun Long
- Diabolos -- Performed by Gérald Cibola
- Icarian Trio -- Performed by Valeriy Aleshin, Valeriya Aleshina and Filipp Koutznetsov
- Illusion -- Performed by Muriel Brugman and Scott Nelson Shawl
- Juggling -- Performed by Jochen Schell
- Musical Fantasy – Pans Concerto Performed by Michel Lauzière

/// EPISODE 13: “COSMIC WINDS” (“DISCO”)

A discotheque occupies an entire planet situated somewhere in intergalactic space. As is the case for all Saturday night hot spots, entry into the disco can be difficult. A customs officer hand picks the clientele very selectively. For one inoffensive crank in particular, admission is very difficult. The discotheque attracts an odd clientele – extraterrestrials, creatures of the sun, an intergalactic adventurer named Milla Jovovich, Conrad MacLeod from the film Highlander (played by Christophe Lambert), and Deepak Chopra, guru of to stars. It seems to be similar to a discotheque on Earth.... but in appearance only. When extraterrestrials party, their lovers' quarrels are more shocking, flirtation is more scintillating, feats are more flamboyant, beautiful women are different, and getaways are clearly more spectacular!

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL ARTISTS

- *Customs Officer from Mystere* -- Performed by Nicky Dewhurst.
- *Aerial Hoops from O* -- Performers display acrobatic poses demanding great strength and flexibility inside a hoop suspended above the stage. Performed by Greg Wise, Sebastien Stella and Yuliya Eremina.

GUEST ARTISTS

- Acrobatic Wheel ("Wheel of Death") -- Performed by Joseph Dominick Bauer.
- Aerial Spiral -- Performed by Elmira Zemskova.
- Contortion -- Performed by Vladimir Gagarine.
- Illusion, Screen and Various -- Performed by Michael Menes.
- Juggling (pins) -- Performed by Jason Garfield.
- Slack Wire -- Performed by Andrey Ivakhenko.
- Two Big Extraterrestrial Creatures (Los Katos) -- Performed by Kim Hilton and Kalli Manoloaros.
- Whirling Dervish -- Performed by Gregangelo Whirling Circle Dervish.

/// PARTING WORDS

Solstrom is to Cirque du Soleil what a buffet is to dining; you get quantity over quality. There's a lot of stuff but none of it is very good and everything is watered down. A good Cirque du Soleil production is very much like a gourmet meal at a fine restaurant; presentation is everything. In this case I expected Cordon Bleu and got Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Many fans were concerned when Zumanity was in the works that Cirque would somehow damage its own image with the release of a show that so seemingly strayed from its tradition. This is the risk the company takes when targeting a show to a specific audience. However, whereas I found Zumanity to be an intense, evocative and well thought out expansion of Cirque's artistic capabilities, providing a strong complement to the company's existing repertoire, I feel Solstrom is derivative and poorly crafted. This time I feel that Cirque rested on its laurels instead of pushing the envelope and charging into uncharted territory. The company squandered the potential of the new television series and merely stuck its name on an inferior product. I certainly would not have bothered watching this program if it did not carry the Cirque du Soleil banner and I am indeed concerned about any potential lasting effects in releasing this show to a wide audience. It's not at all representative of the artistry and quality Cirque is capable of, and if Solstrom were the first I had ever seen of the company I would not have been impressed in the least. Nor would I have been inspired to shell out the money to see their live shows.

There are several areas where Solstrom needs work. Firstly, the series needs a director (or directors) with a clear artistic vision and an eye for visual storytelling. There are so many talented directors on the avant-garde of film that Cirque could have hired to make the series innovative instead of inane. Higher production quality is a must. If Cirque is going to produce a television series it should do it right and that means investing the necessary time, resources and money. I would have liked to see a much more film-like visual quality with scenes shot "on-location" as well as in a studio, as they did with Journey of Man. There is a painful need for better art direction and cinematography. The music would be much more effective if it were written by a more seasoned composer. What are Benoit Jutras and René Dupéré doing nowadays anyway? Furthermore, instead of synthesizers they should spring for a full scoring orchestra. And, perhaps most importantly, they should scrap the irritating, pointless narration and re-think the Sesame Street-does-Cirque style. When it comes to Cirque du Soleil productions it is the presentation and artistry that matter most. The company shouldn't feel that it needs to pander to appeal to a wide audience.



CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

LIVE AT MGM GRAND



Cirque planted what it called a “Flower in the Desert” with *Mystère* in 1993, and then watched its newly-formed garden bloom when it launched “O” in 1998 to enormous success. The two shows would come to dominate The Strip, setting Cirque du Soleil as the King of Entertainment in Las Vegas. But Cirque wasn’t done yet. Two years after Mirage Resorts and MGM Grand merged (to form MGM-Mirage), plans to expand Cirque’s presence on The Strip were announced with not just one, but two new shows! The first, *Zumanity*, premiered in 2003 at New York-New York Casino-Hotel, the second – *KÀ* - for the MGM Grand would replace “*EFX Alive!*” starring Rick Springfield, would open in 2004 – Cirque du Soleil’s 20th Anniversary year.

Robert Lepage was set as director with Guy Caron (*Le Magie Continue*, *Dralion*) serving as Director of Creation. The show was set to “shake the spectator’s perception of space, conception of the law of gravity, and comprehension of the world in three dimensions.”

These projects built upon the relationship between Cirque du Soleil and MGM-Mirage, which started back in 1992 with a special presentation of “*Nouvelle Experience*” on the grounds of the Mirage hotel-casino. “MGM Mirage has an excellent grasp of the creative strengths and energy that drive Cirque du Soleil,” said Guy Laliberté, CEO and Founder in the press release for the dual projects. “We have always held fast to our dream of reinventing other forms of entertainment.” And it certainly looked as if Cirque du Soleil would continue to “Re-invent the Circus” in the desert of Las Vegas, and worldwide, as their expanded partnership with MGM Mirage globalized their efforts even more. The race was on...

ESSENTIALS

Premiere:	November 26, 2004 (Previews) February 3, 2005 (Gala)
Type:	Resident / Theater
Director:	Robert Lepage
Composer:	René Dupéré
Location:	MGM Grand, Las Vegas

Creative Team

Guide	Sound
Guy Laliberté	Jonathan Deans
Director	Projection
Robert Lepage	Holger Förterer
Creation	Puppets
Guy Caron	Michael Curry
Theater & Set	Props
Mark Fisher	Patricia Ruel
Costumes	Rigging
Marie Vaillancourt	Jaque Paquin
Composer	Aerial Acrobatics
René Dupéré	André Simard
Choreographer	Makeup
Jacques Heim	Nathalie Gagné
Lighting	
Luc Lafortune	

/// DEFYING THE LAWS OF GRAVITY

By the end of 2002 speculation ran wild regarding just what Cirque had up its sleeve. Casting calls became rare windows into just what the company had in mind, leaking out small details about the performances/acts under consideration for each. The MGM Grand show, slated to debut sometime in 2004, was looking for artists skilled in Archery and the Martial Arts -- Wu Shu, Kung Fu, and Akido with the ability to use a Sabre, Nunchakus or Katana. The MGM Grand show is also searching for twin female acrobats for a special duo act.

From the moment the casting calls went out we knew these two shows would be completely different from *Mystère* or "O".

Cirque du Soleil's casting website is a useful tool for artists wishing to become part of the troupe, but for fans it can also be a wonderful gold mine of information pertaining to Cirque's upcoming shows. Hence, by June 2003 the *Fascination!* Newsletter learned even more about Cirque 2004 (then going by the working title of "Duality"):

The show is described as a "fantastic epic [that] will shatter space perception and defy the laws of gravity, with a story based on duality, personified by twins who will illustrate the battle that life forces us to wage against ourselves." This description of the show is nothing new however, and has been discussed in fandom before. Certain details regarding what we may see in the show have remained a mystery only to crop up on the casting site. Such tidbits include that the show would feature "acrobatic dance, martial arts, puppets, music, singing and Cirque du Soleil's acrobatic savoir-faire". Wait, puppets?

Yes, Cirque is placing its acrobatic "savoir-faire" (know-how) in the hands of Robert Lepage, who is directing the show, and Guy Caron (Dralion), the Director of Creation. What is interesting, however, is that information about some of the characters we'll see in the show has come to light -- the Evil Counsellor and the Blind Man: The Evil Counselor is the principal character in this new show. He's described as a "poisonous character and [a] power-hungry manipulator (like Shakespeare's Iago or Richard III)." The Blind Man is also a principal character, old, wise, and will personify an African wizard.

But we had also learned about some discord.

One of the most important aspects of putting a show together is its creative team. During the "Dragone Era" (1990-1999), the creative team remained relatively the same -- the same lighting specialist, the same sound designer, the same make-up designer, etc. Upon Franco Dragone's departure, most of that team decided take a break as well (or broke away from Cirque du Soleil to follow Dragone). So for 1999's *Dralion* and 2002's *Varekai*, many of the creators were new or upcoming specialists who hadn't worked with Cirque before. So when Cirque decided to up-the-ante in Las Vegas with two new shows it wanted a few veterans to join the creative process.

One of those creative veterans was composer Benoit Jutras, who composed music for Le Cirque Réinventé, Fascination, Mystère (with René Dupéré), and Quidam, “O”, La Nouba and Journey of Man (solo). He was brought on board the Cirque 2004 project early on; however, he left a year into the assignment citing “creative differences”. Cirque then turned to René Dupéré (who said when he left Cirque following 2004’s Alegría that he’d be interested in composing a score for a non-big top show), who joined the project and composed the score for KÀ.

What those creative differences were have never officially been discussed; however, in a 2011 interview Fascination did with Mr. Jutras he did say he’d been working on the project for a year before leaving “in a mutual parting of the ways.” We also asked if any of that music had been used in other venues. His reply: “Yes, actually. I did reuse a few pieces for Le Rêve and The House of Dancing Water. The main theme for The House of Dancing Water was originally created for KÀ. And there were two other pieces but [I only used] the ribs [of them]. I’m writing so close to the image most of the time that it becomes difficult to reuse the music. If I can I just reuse a few bars or the main theme. René has more of a tendency to write songs so it’s easier to move. My structures are shorter and so close to the action that when you take out the action it just doesn’t make sense anymore.”

René Dupéré’s score for KA incorporated a symphonic orchestra of 57 musicians and a choir of over 40 singers, making KÀ Cirque du Soleil’s most ambitious recording to date. And performing that music would also be one of Cirque’s ambitious undertakings. The orchestra is sampled and synched to a live (hidden) band during performances and piping that music to patrons took on new levels: every seat in the KÀ Theater has two speakers built into its headrest, which allows sound effects to be targeted, manipulated and customized to any of the theater’s 16 seating zones. Talk about an undertaking!

/// DUALITY IN MOTION

On September 15, 2004, Cirque finally announced the show to the world via a press conference held at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. In the days after the official word had been released there were copious amounts of buzz regarding the announcement, in both media and fan circles. So much so that a plethora of questions had arisen regarding the production and sometimes those answers weren’t forthcoming. They certainly weren’t for this writer, who was quite preoccupied out of his home country — in the city of Kyoto to be exact — embarking on the second phase of a trip to Japan. I recalled with clarity eyeing the announcement as I read my email messages at K’s Backpacker’s House with curiosity, asking myself... what was this KÀ really all about? In Issue #38 – October 2004 – Fascination explored several of these questions.

Q. What does KÀ mean?

A. According to Wikipedia, in Egyptian mythology it is written the human soul is made up of five distinct parts: the Ka, Akh, Ba, Shadow and the Name. The Ka, therefore, is the spiritual soul of a person, existing in tandem with the living being and continuing throughout the afterlife. Readers with knowledge of the Japanese language may also recognize the word “ka,” a particle, which is used to change a statement sentence into a question and for comparisons, among other things.

That concept was also reflected in the show's visual signature, which evokes the central theme of duality as personified by the twins and the symbolic use of fire. The logo was said to be influenced by Asian iconography. Fans may be interested to know that KÀ's working title was "duality".

Q. What is KÀ about?

A. KÀ is all about duality, or the concept of twins. It is that concept, one of duality ("personified by the twins and the symbolic use of fire"), which is reflected in the show's vision and therefore transfers to the show's title.

According to the Cirque press release, KÀ combines "acrobatic performances, martial arts, puppetry, multimedia and pyrotechnics to illustrate the nature of duality [and] tells the epic saga of separated twins—a boy and a girl—who embark on a perilous journey to fulfill their linked destinies. As the plot unfolds, danger lies in wait for them at every turn. Archers and spearmen hunt the twins relentlessly, as their quest takes them through a succession of challenging landscapes, from mysterious seashore through menacing mountains and foreboding forests."

The show's creative elements are essential to invoking the world of KÀ. The costumes for the international cast of 72 artists have an Asian influence, as reflected in the lavish imperial court costumes and robust martial artists' warrior uniforms. Additionally, the mood is set by the original score, which incorporates soaring melodies and richly textured arrangements driven through an elaborate audio system that literally surrounds the spectator in sound.

Another important element is the ambivalent power of fire to create and destroy. "Fire is the one thing that holds everything together," says Lepage. "It's the storyline and the saga. It creates conflict and destruction as it gives life and light."

Cirque du Soleil Founder and CEO, Guy Laliberté, describes KÀ as "the most theatrical show we've ever done." It is scripted with a strongly defined almost cinematic narrative, with clearly identified characters and story arcs. The execution of that narrative called for more technologically advanced visual effects than Cirque du Soleil has ever attempted. "That's why I wanted Robert Lepage to write and direct the show. With his vast experience in theatre and film, his knowledge of the technology and his curiosity and innovative spirit, he was the only man for the job."

Q. How much did KÀ cost to produce?

A. According to the Las Vegas Sun, Cirque du Soleil spent \$30 million to bring KA to fruition. The MGM Grand spent \$135 million on the theater, bringing the total price tag to approximately \$165 million US. To bring this number into perspective, it was reported that it cost \$66 million to produce Zumanity at the NY-NY Hotel/Casino, \$90 million US cost for "O" at Bellagio (\$70 million theater/\$20 million production) and \$20 million plus for Mystère at Treasure Island.

Q. How many/what are the acts?

A. During the media preview at least one of the "acts" was presented, "The Wheel of Death". The Wheel is a remarkable looking contraption that seems more like a ride that might be found on your local fair's midway than in a Cirque du Soleil show. It consists of two "wheels" attached at the end of two moving arms in which performers climb into, around and on top to perform their feats of acrobatics. The actual list of the rest of the "acts" has not been presented, however there have been rumors. Such tidbits include that the show will feature "acrobatic dance, martial arts, puppets, bungee aerial acts, and trampolines."

Q. How many performers are in KÀ?

A. There are currently 72 performers assigned to KÀ.

Q. What is the KÀ Theater like?

A. Not too many details regarding the KÀ Theater have been released up to this point, but suffice it to say the theater is a remarkable performance space. It sits 1,951 patrons and, as reported above, came at a cost of \$135 million US.

"The arrival of KÀ is the crown jewel in the renaissance of MGM Grand," says Gamal Aziz, MGM Grand president and COO. "Throughout our reinvention, we have strived for the best in dining, entertainment and service. With the unveiling of KÀ, MGM Grand is taken to a new level."

Previously the spectacular shows EFX and EFX Alive occupied that space, however, if you've seen them and know the theater get ready for a shock – the space was totally renovated and remade to specifically house KÀ. It is said there is no definable stage as we know it. Instead the fixed stage has been replaced by "a fog-filled 'void'" in which platforms and riggings move in and out as needed.

"There are a lot of things that people will see that so far have been done only in movies and television with special effects. Here it is for real," said Guy Laliberté. It's "the most theatrical show we've ever done."

Q. When does KÀ premiere?

A. Special preview performances begin on November 26, 2004 at 8:00pm. One show per evening will be held from November 26th through December 7th, when a two show per-night schedule will begin at 7:00pm and 10:30pm (though this may change). KÀ is scheduled to perform Friday through Tuesday (Dark Wednesday/Thursday). Children under five-years of age are not permitted into the theater and guests under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult.

With as many questions as could be answered before the show premiered we waited... After a slight technical delay (the show was scheduled to premiere on June 25, 2004, then July 9, 2004) KÀ had its first "Lion's Den" performance (a full run-through with the boss, Guy Laliberté) on November 6, 2004 (originally scheduled for November 5th), had a second "Lion's Den" on November 12, 2004, began preview performances on November 26, 2004 and later held its official gala opening on February 3, 2005.

/// THE PILLARS OF CREATION

The 1,950-seat KÀ Theatre is unique in many ways, most obviously because there is not a traditional stage. The audience sits facing an apparently bottomless void filled with smoke. Above, around and inside the void, the artists make their entrances, perform, and make their exits, without ever treading the boards of a conventional stage. Instead, they fly through the air, or perform on two moving platforms that operate independently of each other: the Sand Cliff Deck and the Tatami Deck. Additionally, the Post and Beam structure extends from the stage area into the audience, to create a continuous performance space that defies the conventions of traditional theatres.

Sand Cliff Deck and Gantry Crane

The Sand Cliff Deck is an enormous performance space measuring 25x50 feet with a six-foot depth and weighing 80,000 pounds. It is supported and controlled by an inverted gantry crane, which is essentially a giant mechanical arm attached to four 75-foot long hydraulic cylinders, that run along two support columns. The gantry crane can lift the sand cliff deck up and down, rotate 360 degrees and tilt from flat to 110 degrees--all at the same time. The gantry crane and Sand Cliff Deck are powered by five 250hp pumps and a 3500 gallon oil reservoir. The Sand Cliff Deck and gantry crane have a combined weight of approximately 350,000 pounds.

Tatami Deck

The Tatami Deck is another major performance space used in KÀ. It measures 30x30 feet and weighs between 75,000 to 100,000 pounds. The Tatami Deck can slide forward almost 50 feet at full travel, like a giant sliding drawer. At its full extension, it appears to float over the abyss. It runs on two electric motors and uses hydraulic brakes.

Stage Lifts

There are five stage lifts used to create the performance space and move props and artists during the show. Each lift is raised or lowered by four to seven spiral lifts, depending on its size. The stage lifts move a maximum of 25 feet from bottom to top. Four of the lifts have a maximum speed of 20 feet per second, and the fifth can move at 60 feet per second. The largest lifts cover 1400 square feet each.

Defining Dimensions

- 149 feet – From the high grid (ceiling) to lowest floor level.
- 98 feet – From stage level (boardwalk) to high grid (ceiling).
- 51 feet – From stage level to the lowest floor level.
- 120 feet – The width of the performance area.
- 120 feet – From the front of boardwalk to the back wall of the theatre.

Video Projections

The video projections in KÀ are an intricate mix of computer-generated effects and human input that turn the performance space into a cinema screen. To create the interactive projections that follow an artist's movement, the artists are captured by an infrared-sensitive camera above the stage and their movements are tracked by a computer. Additionally, the performance area is formatted into an oversized touch-screen that can determine the precise position of each artist. The information gathered from them influences the mathematical parameters of any number of worlds that are then re-projected onto the space they occupy.

Lighting

There are 24 dimmer racks and 2 portable dimmer packs with 24 dimmers for a total of 2260 dimmers. The lighting system requires 22,528 control channels to operate it from 10 specialized lighting computer consoles running on a fiber optic backbone. There are 436 custom LED fixtures just for lighting the post and beam structure front of house, capable of producing over 1,000,000 different colors. There are 3,228 total lighting fixtures: 44 automated luminaries, 130 color scrollers (capable of up to 32 colors each) and 12 follow-spots (run by 8 technicians). The lighting system uses 2.2 million watts of power – if all lights are on at once. One fixture uses 70000 watts of power and produces a lightning effect. There are three 18,000 lumen video projectors that are computer controlled and interactive via three different systems with the artists on stage.

Audio

To fill the KÀ Theatre with sound takes 524,150 total watts of amplifier power pumping an intricately layered mix of sound effects and music to 4,774 loudspeaker drivers in 2,139 cabinets. The sound system weighs 43,868 pounds. The main audio system covers 1,980,000 cubic feet of air space. Every seat in the KÀ Theatre has two speakers built into its headrest which allows sound effects to be targeted, manipulated and customized to any of 16 seating zones.

Costumes and Make-up

Seventy specialists worked more than 35,000 hours to produce the first full set of KÀ costumes at the Cirque du Soleil headquarters in Montreal. All costumes, head pieces (wigs and hats) and shoes are custom-made for the 75 KÀ artists. There are approximately 400 pairs of shoes for the artists. There are 15 wigs used in the show. The body imprints on the blue Forest costumes are taken from one male and one female KÀ artist. There are six different body tattoo designs on the unitards worn by the Archers and Spearmen. One Forest hat takes 40 hours to make. The Spearmen shoes are created to look like they aren't wearing shoes, with molded rubber toes affixed to a show base. All KÀ artists apply their own make-up, and it takes from 45 minutes to two hours to complete. There are three make-up technicians who airbrush the faces of artists for each performance. Many artists glue Austrian crystals to their faces as part of their make-up. The Chief Archer character has the most complex make-up application, with 43 steps and 22 different brushes.

Special Effects

The scrim (sheer black curtain) is 75 feet tall by 140 feet wide. During the pre-show, approximately 120 fireballs are discharged. These fireballs measure 30 feet in height and reach temperatures of 1200° Fahrenheit. Many of the fog effects in KÀ are created using liquid nitrogen, which has a temperature of approximately -300° Fahrenheit. By mixing it with hot water, a low fog effect is created. KÀ has a 13,000 gallon storage tank for liquid nitrogen. For the Forest scene, a mist curtain is created that is 60 feet wide and falls 75 feet. The mist system is softened water run through very fine nozzles at 2500 pounds per square inch. For the Mountain Tribe scenes, snow machines and fans float very fine soap suds through the air to make a very convincing snowfall. 119 pyrotechnic devices are fired throughout the show.

Props and Puppets

The Props and Puppet Department is responsible for more than 500 individual props, 10 larger-than-life puppets, 21 mini puppets, and six butterflies. The Stick Bug puppet is over 16 feet long and is operated by two artists. The Snake is over 80 feet long, but the head only weighs five pounds, so that it can be easily manipulated by the artist inside.

An estimated 1,300 hours went into making one crab puppet, which is worn by an artist in a back bend position. The spears are made of rattan from China, which is chosen for its durability and flexibility. Over 110 live arrows are shot through the air at each performance. The artists spent many hours in training to learn proper archery techniques.

Rigging

There are more than 160 harnesses for the artists, comprised of 21 different types. Each harness is hand-fitted to the individual artist and is inspected weekly, daily, before and during each show. Acrobatic safety nets are used for artists falling less than 20 feet. For falls over 20 feet, air bags are used in addition to the safety nets. There are a total of 18 winches used to pull two safety nets into the many different configurations needed for the show. Each winch rope (5/8" diameter) has a tensile strength of over 50,000 pounds. The forest grid (truss, catwalk and track system that supports the scenic elements of the Forest scene) and its component parts weigh over 50,000 pounds.

/// MEETING THEIR DESTINY

KÀ deals with the theme of duality and is the epic story of a set of twins, separated at childhood, who must voyage through a series of adventures, while relentlessly pursued by enemies, in order to fulfill their destinies in a classic battle between good and evil.

CHARACTERS

The characters of KÀ inhabit a world of many tribes and factions. These tribes are largely segregated from each other and some tribes are in conflict with others. The story of KÀ brings together the different peoples of this world to meet their collective destiny.

- The Empire – The Empire is a noble, proud and peaceful society which represents the pinnacle of civilization in the world of KÀ. The Empire is the height of art, culture, and education. The Empire has developed a graceful and majestic form of martial arts which its combatants practice.
- The Twins – A boy and a girl represent the hope for the future of the Empire. Heirs to the throne, they are raised to be educated and noble but also skilled in combat. The story of KÀ is the story of the twins as they fulfill their respective destinies.
- The Emperor – He is the monarch of the Empire and father of the Twins. Dressed in luminous robes, the Emperor has a regal air.
- The Empress – She rules by the side of her husband, the Emperor, and is the mother of the Twins. Her elaborate dress references the Peking Opera, and the weeping tree design embroidered on her sleeves suggests a slight melancholy to her character.
- The Nursemaid – The Twins' guardian, she is charged with watching over and caring for the Twins in their young age. Somewhat of a surrogate mother, her relationship with the Twins is one of mutual loyalty and love.
- The Court Jester – The Fool of the court, he shares a special bond with the Twins. He dances and entertains but he is also an agile acrobat and possesses strength and courage beyond his role as a jester.
- The Valets – Servants of the Imperial Court, the Valets are a mischievous and bumbling trio who constantly get into trouble. They play off each others' stupidities like the Three Stooges.
- The Imperial Guards – Practitioners of the graceful and noble form of martial arts developed by the Empire, the Imperial Guards ceremoniously protect the Emperor and his Court. The guards are dressed in Asian-inspired robes with the Empire's tree insignia across the open chest for the men, and the long flowing robes hanging from the upper-body for the women.
- The Archers – The Archers are a malevolent underground society. Comprised of factions of archers and spearmen living deep beneath the surface of the Earth in caves, the bottom of their faces are obscured with muzzles and they have emblazoned intricate tattoos all over their bodies. The Archers mine a rare element that can be processed into powerful explosives for weapons. They have mastered the art of aerial combat and fly from scaffold to scaffold in their underground mines. Their society is built on war, destruction and dominion by force. They will stop at nothing to conquer the world of KÀ and enslave its inhabitants.
- The Evil Counselor – Leader of the Archer Tribe, architect of its deadly arsenal of destruction and strategist behind the Archers' plans for domination. He is the brain of the Archer Tribe.

- The Counselor's Son – A brilliant designer of weapons and war machines and practitioner of the Tribe's Aerial combat techniques, the malignant, jealous and petty son of the Councilor is being reared to succeed his father at the helm of the Archer Tribe.
- The Chief Archer – The stone-cold and imposing General of the Archers' forces, he directs the archers and spearmen during their strategic attacks. He commands the respect and loyalty of his troops. If the Counselor is the brain of the Archers the Chief Archer is the brawn. The only glimpse of his heart is shown in his love for his daughter.
- Chief Archer's Daughter – A femme-fatale, the irresistibly beautiful, tough-as-nails daughter of the Head Archer is desired by all of the men of the Archer tribe. She continually spurs their affection but knows how to use her sexuality to get what she wants from them. The many spider-like references in her costume suggest she is a black-widow although underneath her brazen exterior, she secretly yearns for a virtuous life and the love of one who is pure of heart.
- The Mountain Tribe – A tribe of white fur-clad mountain-dwellers who descend from the heights to fish and scavenge for food. They are agile climbers and mountaineers. Their deceptively primitive appearance gives no hint of the fact that they are actually brilliant engineers and inventors.
- The Forest Tribe – An ancient, mysterious and mystical airborne people who inhabit the treetops of the forest. A majestic tribe gifted with the ability of flight and masters of aerial combat, they are a peaceful society but will fight to free those enslaved and oppressed by the Archers.
- Firefly Boy – The young, handsome leader of the Forest Tribe; he swings from the treetops like Tarzan. His heart of gold compels him to fight to uphold the good in the world.
- The Animals – The animals in the world of KÀ are sentient, possessing human-like characteristics and are a benevolent presence. Some of the animals we meet in KÀ include a pair of crabs, a starfish, a turtle, a giant grass-hopper, a snake and a caterpillar.

SCENES

On the way to a pageant held in their honor, the Imperial Twins challenge each other's skills in the ancestral art of sword play.

On this day of celebration, little do they know of the real challenges awaiting them... Of the roaring thunder that will soon shatter the joyful sounds of their laughter... Of the destruction and mayhem that will force an entire people into exile and... Of the chaos of war about to separate a brother from a sister.

This is the story of the coming of age of a young man and a young woman through their encounters with love, conflict and the duality of KÀ, the fire that can either unite or separate, destroy or illuminate.

THE PAGEANT

The Royal Barge carries the Twins to the festivities as they play on the deck. They are entertained by the court with martial arts demonstration of strength and agility, including Wushu, Chinese Opera, and Brazilian Capoeira. The Twins display their musical ability with a light-hearted duet on flute. Just beyond their peaceful kingdom, imminent danger lurks as Archers and Spearmen prepare to attack.

THE STORM

To escape the Archers and Spearmen, the Nursemaid drags the Twin Sister onto a boat and they escape by sea, only to encounter a massive storm that capsizes their vessel. The specially-designed boat structure weighs almost 1800 pounds and the rocking and turning movements are completely manipulated by the artists onboard.

THE DEEP

The Nursemaid falls into the depths of the rough sea followed by the Twin Sister who plunges to rescue her. Air bubbles are created through interactive video projections triggered by infrared sensors that react to the movement of the artists.

THE ARCHER'S DEN

Under the leadership of the Chief Archer, the Archers and Spearmen celebrate their victory while their prisoners languish. The Counselor's Son introduces his diabolical creation, a machine that grinds bones with the magical ore to unleash the destructive power of fire.

WASH-UP ON SHORE

Following the boat's sinking, the Twin Sister, Nurse and Valets are reunited on a golden sandy beach. They encounter giant sea creatures, including a silly turtle, mischievous starfish, curious blue potato bug and a pair of playful crabs. The human-sized puppets are designed to accentuate the acrobatic proficiency of the performers while maintaining the animals' natural movements. The sand is created using 350 cubic feet of granular cork from Portugal.

SHADOW PLAY

While guiding the Twin Brother away from danger, the Court Jester distracts the frightened boy by teaching him the art of shadow puppets. These simple yet poignant gestures represent one of the earliest forms of story-telling.

THE CLIMB

The Twin Sister, Nursemaid and Valets must climb a steep cliff with the Archers and Spearmen giving chase. The artists' movements are choreographed to follow the Sand Cliff Deck as it rotates up to 12 degrees per second, as well as showing off its lifting motion, which produces artists' falls up to 60 feet into unseen air bags. The 80 "arrows" that appear to strike the surface are extendable pegs synchronized with the artists' choreography.

BLIZZARD

The Twin Sister is rescued by a fur-clad Mountain Tribe, who also discover the Nurse wandering aimlessly, and reunite the two. The tribesmen show off their climbing prowess by manually ascending 50 feet to join their fellow tribesmen on the mountaintop, as created by the Sand Cliff Deck in its upright vertical position. The accompanying video projection of the frozen cliff face reacts to the performers' movements to create falling rocks.

THE FLIGHT

Under the threat of attack by the Archers and Spearmen, the Mountain Tribe transforms their simple tent dwelling into a miraculous man-powered flying machine and escape with the Twin Sister, who is precariously hanging more than 50 feet above the ground. The bird's flight circles over the audience before descending into the abyss. The bird's flight is created using four winches to control direction and one load-bearing winch to carry the weight.

TWIN BROTHER IN CAPTIVITY

The captured Twin Brother is imprisoned. Just as things seem hopeless, he discovers a friend in the Chief Archer's Daughter. After sharing a tender moment, she sets him free and then expresses her flirtatious desires through a touching performance using the Twins' flutes.

THE FOREST PEOPLE

Bright luminous creatures soar through a majestic forest, which is also the home to larger-than-life bugs, flowers and a stunning 80-foot snake. The Firefly Boy glides and dives as he performs aerial acrobatics and makes a special connection with the Twin Sister when she plummets from the flying bird into his world. The Forest People are agile high in the trees performing on bungees and swing poles, which combines traditional Chinese poles with the flying trapeze. There are 14 "trees" in the Forest scene made of corrugated steel tube. Each has a diameter of four feet and is up to 80 feet tall.

THE SLAVE CAGE

The Twins are joyously reunited at last and the prisoners overtake their evil captors as the Wheel of Death takes center stage in an awe-inspiring display of epic feats. The two artists balance and control the spinning of the apparatus from their opposing cages attached to the center axle. As one runs and jumps on the outside of one cage the other controls the speed by walking or running inside the other cage. The Wheel of Death in the Slave Cage scene is comprised of two independent sets of circular "cages" that rotate around a common axle. The movement is completely controlled by the artists in the "cages".

THE BATTLE BEGINS

In the culmination of their extraordinary journeys, the Twins are joined by the Firefly Boy and the Forest People for the final battle against the evil Archers and Spearmen, led by the Counselor and his son. The aerial perspective of the battle highlights the adversaries as they soar through the air, traveling up to 50 feet, and move perpendicular to the ground. The choreographed movements of the 16 artists are achieved through individual high-speed winches controlled through a wireless remote in each costume. The scene is further intensified by the interactive video projections triggered by the artists as they make contact with the battleground.

AFTERMATH

Triumphant in battle, harmony is restored to the empire. Being blinded in the battle has allowed the Counselor's Son to see the error of his ways. His gift to the kingdom is a spectacular presentation of fireworks to illuminate and unite in peace.

/// AFTER THE PREMIERE

A few changes have come to the show since the show's debut. First, the removal of the Pillars act – done so due to the difficulties of presenting this act night-after-night, the injuries it has caused and (as rumors suggest) at the behest of Robert Lepage who felt the act did not ultimately fit into the story (although it has also been suggested that the show needed to be trimmed for time and Pillars was the logical choice). Second, a new visual identity (January 2007), which abandoned the duality part of the show's concept and replaced it with scenes from The Battle. And third, the addition of an aerial duet featuring the firefly boy and the twin sister (November 9, 2007).

KÀ has been lavished with generally favorable and positive reviews; however, if there's been one negative comment regarding the production, it's leveled at the show's stage. "The stage itself is the main star of the show, overshadowing the performers and ultimately resulting in a weaker show." Never-the-less, the show has received the prestigious "Thea Award for Outstanding Technical Achievement", and continues to delight crowds night after night. Among its other milestones, KÀ held its 2000th performance on Wednesday, February 18, 2009, its 3,000th performance on Wednesday, March 23, 2011, and its 4,000th performance on April 20, 2013.

But it would be what happened on Saturday, June 29, 2013 that would place a dark mark over the show for years to come. On that Saturday night, during the latter stages of the show, a performer suspended by a wire from the show's famed vertical stage, dropped 90 feet to the open, unseen pit below. After a nearly four-month investigation, Nevada OSHA concluded that Sarah Guillot-Guyard fell after the wire rope suspending her during the show's Final Battle scene broke, causing her to fall. The 31-year-old Guillot-Guyard, who had two young children, was transported to University Medical Center's trauma unit and was pronounced dead from multiple blunt force traumas. OSHA found that the wire rope suspending Guillot-Guyard "was severed due to the rapid ascent of the performer, ultimately causing the rope to be freed from the sheave/pulley and scraping against a shear point." In other words, the wire had shifted out of the disk in the pulley housing and was cut as a result of the combined tension of Guillot-Guyard's weight and the torque from the electric motor pulling her up the show's moveable stage, which was set in a vertical position. Guillot-Guyard fell unimpeded to the floor below the opening in the stage. Her death was the first during a performance in Cirque's 29-year history.

As a result of the OSHA investigation, inspectors issued six citations against Cirque and three against MGM Grand. Cirque's citations included a failure to "protect or prevent 'Ka' employees from striking an overhead grid during the 'Ka' show at the 'Ka' Theater." This matches reports from those familiar with the "Ka" staging and fatal incident that Guillot-Guyard did hit the metal grid over the stage as she ascended high above the Final Battle scene, which jarred the rope connecting her to her harness.

The report also cited Cirque for failing to “provide proper training for the ‘Ka’ Battle Spearman Warrior employee involved in the accident in the use of equipment and tasks used in the ‘Ka’ Show battle scene” and also for removing “equipment from a fatality site before Nevada OSHA authorized the dismantling and removal of the equipment (38 feet of wire rope that was attached to the victim at the time of the accident).” The monetary penalties issued to Cirque were \$25,235. Those against MGM Grand were \$7,000.

In a statement that also referenced Cirque’s internal review of the incident, she said: “Cirque du Soleil completed an exhaustive review of its safety policies and procedures in the wake of the tragic accident involving Sarah. We have redoubled our efforts to ensure the overall diligence and safety of our performers and crew. We have received and reviewed the OSHA citations. We have initiated the appeal process as part of OSHA’s administrative protocol. Safety always has been the top priority for Cirque du Soleil, its performers and crew members.”

After a brief dark period, KÀ returned triumphantly, and is continuing to wow audiences in Las Vegas today.