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Jubilation as the circus hits town

Cirque du Soleil has finally arrived in Taiwan for an already sold-out four-week run of its touring show, 'Alegria'

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER



The audience oohed, ahed, laughed and cheered wildly as Cirque du Soleil made its highly anticipated debut in Taipei on Wednesday night with its touring show *Alegria*, which runs twice a day until Feb. 22 and is already sold out.

The Montreal-based performing arts company charmed and captivated a tent full of nearly 2,500 people with surreal characters in extravagant costumes, body-defying acrobatic stunts and theatrical finesse.

The show takes its name from the Spanish word for "jubilation," and in its online program literature Cirque lists themes that form the backdrop of *Alegria's* world: power and how it is passed on between generations, the historical shift from ancient monarchies to modern democracies, and old age versus youth.

The themes are framed by a cast of characters such as Fleur (played by Evgueni Ivanov), a grouchy, troll-like figure dressed in a long-tailed, red velvet jacket. Looking like an aging ringmaster in a modern circus, he prances back and forth on stage with several "nostalgic old birds" that dress in ornate 19th-century garb and hold pretensions of aristocracy, but appear unnatural and awkward.

Bringing youth and fantasy to the mix are several young winged nymphs, who dance on stage, hold up mirrors and strike alluring poses. Two singers in elegant gowns, one in white and the other in black, are the "voice" of the show as they croon in a make-believe language; while three clowns provide childlike wonder and comic relief.

It was easy to get lost in the otherworldly qualities of the characters and forget about the themes. Not that it matters. *Alegria*, as Cirque says, is ultimately about mood. There are no linear narratives, but rather a succession of acts that stir the emotions.

Visually, the show centered on the body and the exhilaration derived from pushing its limits.

Much of the evening was filled with the thrills of flying. In the trampoline act *Power Track*, 12 acrobats performed a rapid-fire succession of flips, spins and jumps that grew higher, more complex and spectacular. They moved with the steady discipline of martial artists and the grace of ballet dancers, and their long-held, proud poses after each move elicited raucous cheers from the audience.

Another set of acrobats, adorned with beaks and hats with feathers, were launched into the air from "Russian Bars," long flexible beams ranging between 5cm and 15cm in width. For the show's finale, the *Aerial High Bar*, a team of Russian acrobats hung suspended in the air on bars placed more than 12m above the stage and caught each other by the hands as they swung back and forth. The act concludes

with a dramatic plunge into a large net stretched out below.

Closer to the ground, but equally engrossing, were unfathomable body poses from several contortionists. In the solo act *Manipulation*, Masha Silaeva performed a gymnastic routine while waving a long silk ribbon that created the illusion of spherical lines orbiting her body. Later she spun as many as six silver hula-hoops at the same time in various poses, some vaguely erotic, some simply strange.

Even more unsettling was a Mongolian duo of contortionists, Ulziibuyan Mergen and Oyun-Erdene Senge. They moved together in eerie unison, flexing their limber bodies into twisted, sculpture-like shapes. Their calm, almost nonchalant expressions made the poses seem more unbelievable.

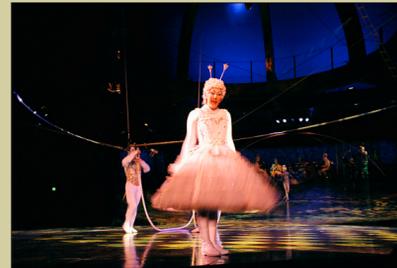
Alegria was most impressive for its acrobatics, but a strong sense of theatrical dynamics kept the audience engaged from beginning to end. When they weren't gasping at flying people, they were clapping along with the live band or laughing at the clowns, who won the audience over with a few well-timed and well-practiced Mandarin phrases and hilarious parodies of the acrobats.

But the clowns were not only about laughs — they also featured in the show's most poignant segment. In an act adapted from Russian performer Slava Polunin's *Snow Show*, a clown emptied a large suitcase to find remnants of times past. He dug out an old overcoat, which came to life and revived memories of heartbreak. The clown found and then ripped up a letter, perhaps from a past lover, and threw the scraps into the air, which grew into a fantastic storm that filled the entire room with cold air and snow confetti.

Alegria's Grammy-nominated musical score, written by Rene Dupere, served as the emotional core of the show. The top-notch live band of six musicians began the evening with a street-like parade, marching through the audience section with a combination of brass and acoustic instruments. Throughout the night they traversed genres ranging from pop and jazz to tango and klezmer. The two singers delivered their vocals with a rock opera feel.

The Grand Chapiteau — Cirque's large white-top tent — was inviting and felt easily accessible. The audience is arranged in a semi-circle around the stage, giving the space an intimate feel.

Cirque's Bohemian and street show roots are a little less apparent nowadays — there is a soft commercial vibe in the lobby area of the tent, with centrally placed merchandising stands selling a large collection of branded souvenirs and trinkets. But the stands are not intrusive and the goods will likely whet Taiwan's appetite for more from this contemporary circus.



Scenes from Wednesday's Taiwan debut of Cirque du Soleil's *Alegria*, which was so eagerly anticipated that the 56-show run sold out months in advance. The response was so positive that the Montreal-based performing arts group says it plans to put Taiwan on its Asia touring schedule.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Taiwan, we'll be back: Cirque du Soleil

Cirque du Soleil's 56-show run of *Alegria* in Taipei sold out months before the premiere, which was a pleasant surprise for the internationally renowned circus.

"It actually doesn't happen in many places in the world," said Milan Rokic, Cirque's Vice President of Marketing Asia-Pacific, in an interview with the *Taipei Times*. "We were very surprised and thrilled with the response. I think there must have been a pent-up demand or expectation for Cirque du Soleil's arrival."

Those who missed out on tickets to see Canada's most famous theatrical export will have more chances to come.

Rokic said that Cirque plans to bring a different show to Taiwan within two years. "Our global tour plan will now include Taiwan, so it will become part of an Asia touring schedule," he said. The group currently has six shows touring globally.

Cirque has grown quickly, having started as a "ragtag" group of Montreal



Denys Tolstov performs a hand-balancing act in Cirque du Soleil's *Alegria*.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

street performers in 1984. It now has over 4,000 employees in 40 different countries, with 19 productions being performed simultaneously around the world.

While the group now enjoys worldwide recognition, it has had to make a few adjustments for the Chinese-speaking market, said Rokic.

"We've had to look at the name of our show in Chinese," he said. "We were known in Hong Kong and mainland China after a while as Taiyang Maxi Tuan (太陽馬戲團). 'Maxi' (馬戲) was the traditional translation for circus but was more linked to an animal circus. So we renamed ourselves as 'Taiyang Jutuan' (太陽劇團), to get closer connected to international performing arts."

Part of Cirque's appeal is that it is not a "traditional circus," said Rokic, who noted the Chinese name was meant to reflect a "more theatrical" aspect.

— DAVID CHEN