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Theater review: Prepare to be amazed by Cirque du Soleil's "Saltimbanco"

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How many times can you write “amazing”?

That’s the problem you face when writing about Cirque du Soleil. The word keeps popping up — amazing, amazing, amazing — and as a writer, you realize your limitations. Words can’t describe something that defies words, something that should be seen, not read about, to be believed.

But I’m reviewing “Saltimbanco,” the first Cirque show to play Southwest Florida. It’s my job. So I’ll give it a shot.

Besides, “amazing” is as good a word as any.

If Cirque du Soleil is good at anything, it’s creating awe and amazement. This was my third Cirque show, and my jaw still dropped at all the cool things onstage:

- Birdlike acrobats soaring in a bungee-cord ballet high above Germain Arena.
- Two Russian strongmen supporting each other in one cantilevered, muscle-bulging human sculpture after another.
- Performer Ivan Do-Duc riding a bicycle on one wheel like a unicycle, then spinning the whole thing around like a top, then doing a handstand on the handlebars.
- Or juggler Terry Velasquez tossing six, seven or eight balls — it’s hard to tell, they move so fast — that hang in the air like so many eighth notes coordinated to a Latin jazz guitar solo.

In other words: amazing.

The heart of Cirque du Soleil has always been psychedelic weirdness, haunting music and stunning feats of human agility, strength and grace. Those are all here.

My only complaints are small ones. The show isn’t quite as polished as its big-city (and, yes, more expensive) brothers. And I’m still not sure what the whole thing was about.

The word “Saltimbanco” comes from the Italian phrase for “jump on a bench.” And the show’s creators tell me they wanted to convey city life from its skyscrapers to its paper-pushing bureaucrats. Yeah, sure. Whatever.

I still don’t know what the rainbow-colored throne or the butterfly-shaped floor or the blue-pajama-clad monkey-girl had to do with anything. My advice here is the same I gave to one family frantically scanning a program to figure everything out: Forget the theme. Just go with it.

Besides, you’re not really meant to make sense of it all. Weird and dreamlike is the goal here, from the moody lighting to the incomprehensible French (don’t worry, it’s used more for effect. You’re not expected to be fluent).

All that Euro-circus strangeness only accentuates the spectacle (presented on a stage thrusting out into the audience at Germain Arena, which is divided in half for this show — I assume to ensure everyone is close enough to have a decent view).

Cirque du Soleil takes all the traditional circus elements — strongmen, clowns, acrobats, animals (or, in this case, people dressed as animals) — and adds its own surreal spin.

For example, you've probably never seen a clown quite like the suspenders-and-ballcap-wearing Amo Gulinello. He mixes mime and his own mouth-made sound effects into something quite terrific. Just watch as he pretends to open doors and jump rope and throw baseballs to audience members. Oh, and by the way, if you're sitting on the floor level, prepare to be messed with.

Sure, "Saltimbanco" isn't as eye-popping a spectacle as what you'd see in Vegas or Orlando. This is a traveling show with fewer performers and fewer special effects.

However, you still get the vital essence of Cirque du Soleil. This is one of the Canadian troupe's oldest shows, and it's easy to see the artistry and skill that made it a household name.

But don't take my word for it. Go see this dream circus for yourself.

Trust me: You'll be amazed.

— "Saltimbanco" continues through Sunday. Tickets for today through Saturday are nearly sold out, but there are plenty left for Sunday.

Tickets are \$35-\$90 and are available by calling 948-7825 or going to the Germain box office. You can also get tickets from Ticketmaster by calling 334-3309, going to ticketmaster.com or visiting local Ticketmaster outlets. Or go to cirquedusoleil.com.
