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Cirque du Soleil makes it to region

'Saltimbanco' is first show here, and it has masked worms

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Think of it as a trippy update to a street-performance tradition - with masked worms and Chinese pole dancers.

The psychedelic circus Cirque du Soleil rolls into town next week with a cast of 50 colorful jugglers, clowns, strongmen, acrobats, trapeze artists, unicycle riders and more.

"Saltimbanco" is the first Cirque du Soleil show to ever play Southwest Florida.

The show's name comes from the Italian phrase "saltare in banco." "It means 'to jump on a bench,'" explains Richard Dagenais, senior artistic director for the 17-year-old Cirque show, which started traveling to arenas in 2007.

The phrase originated from an old European tradition among street performers and vendors, he says. If people wanted to sell elixirs, or juggle, or sing, or give speeches, they'd jump on the nearest park bench.

"So it sort of became their stage," Dagenais says.

Germain Arena is a far cry from a park bench, of course, but "Saltimbanco" takes that urban, make-do spirit and uses it to reimagine modern city life.

So you have Chinese pole dancers scaling poles towering 24 feet above the stage - a heart-pounding symbol of modern skyscraper.

Bungee performers who soar through the air like birds in the city sky.

And oddball characters such as The Vers Masques ("Masked Worms), the faceless bureaucrats who always play it safe; and The Baroques, the rebels and punkers who emerge at night to celebrate life.

"It's a very bright show, and it's very colorful," says head coach Michael John Ocampo. "There's just so much going on onstage."

Ocampo works closely with the performers to make sure their movements are always in character. The Chinese pole dancers, for example, must scurry and jump like lizards scaling the face of a skyscraper.

So Ocampo gives them stage directions sort of like this: "Be more lizard-like."

He laughs at the over-simplification. "There's more to it than that, though."

"Saltimbanco" is a scaled-down version of the effects-heavy Las Vegas shows that made Cirque du Soleil a household name. But you still get much of the typical Cirque experience: awe-inspiring performers dressed in eye-popping costumes and doing feats of strength and agility you probably never thought possible.

All with an eye toward poetic imagery and a deeper meaning than your usual traveling circus. Plus lots of weirdness.

"There are some surreal moments that will get people asking, 'What does that mean?'" Dagenais says. "We like to challenge our audience and make them think."

Additional Facts

If You Go

- What: Cirque du Soleil's "Saltimbanco"
 - When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, July 8-11; 5 p.m. Sunday, July 12; with matinee shows at 3:30 p.m. Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday
 - Where: Germain Arena, 1000 Everblades Parkway, Estero
 - Tickets: \$35-\$90
 - Info: Call 948-7825 or go 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.
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