

# Cirque du Soleil performers dressed to thrill

Written by

**AMY SOWDER**  
 asowder@news-press.com

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Without the elaborate costumes, a Cirque du Soleil show would have an identity crisis. It's essential.

Effervescent spirals swirl out from the jeweled headpieces in Cirque's "Alegria" show alighting the stage of Estero's Germain Arena from Aug. 10-14.

The performers wearing these head sculptures soar from trapezes and finesse feats most people can only gape at in awe. The light, luminous costumes emphasize the agile bodies of these creatures who embody youth, innocence and the future.

The Nostalgic Old Birds cloak themselves in richly colored, aristocratic blouses, jackets and headdresses with ruffles, satin, brocade and feathered finery, but their bottom halves reveal a contrast of unraveling bluish-purple bandages. It shows they're coming undone despite that pretentious front.

"The Old Birds, they're very grand, very established, very ornate as far as their costumes go," said artistic director Tim Smith.

The themes of "Alegria," which means "jubilation" in Spanish, convey the handing down of power over time, the evolution from ancient monarchies to modern democracies, old age and youth. Kings' fools, minstrels, beggars, aristocrats, angels and nymphs make up its universe.

There's an otherworldly elegance to it all.

"It's very fanciful and also very lush and three-dimensional, and almost four-dimensional," said Amy Brown, a wardrobe assistant on the touring show. "Silks and brocades and satins, lots of jewels and gems we have to take care of. We're very meticulous."

Brown and her three other permanent touring wardrobe staffers, plus two local hires in each city, wash 10 to 15 loads of laundry a day.

"Even the fancy bird outfits we machine-wash and drip-dry," Brown said.

Then they inspect each costume and repair

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any missing gems or tears. The costumes, washers, dryers and accessories take up 1½ semitrucks on tour.

With the performers' acrobatics in mind, Dominique Lemieux designed all the show's costumes for its 1994 premiere in Montreal. Since then, the costumes have been wowing more than 10 million people in Canada and the United States. The show hits Europe in less than a year with some avant-garde tweaks.

"Alegria" is but one of many original creations. Cirque du Soleil has 22 different shows running in 2011, and 31 shows in all since the Quebec company formed in 1984.

Therese Ganser of Fort Myers took her daughter to a Cirque show, "La Nouba," five years ago in Orlando and was so impressed she plans to attend the touring "Alegria" show in Estero.

"It was awesome, with the costumes and everything. It's extraordinary," said Ganser, 41. "But this is a different show so I want to see this one. It's going to be a different concept and new costumes."

The two-hour touring show boasts a baroque, operatic style with performers contorting their bodies, flying through the air, tossing flames, twisting, balancing and bouncing — all in flamboyant, yet somehow not garish, costumes and makeup.

Cirque has cornered the costume market,

Smith said.

"The look of Cirque is very joyous and cheerful. It's unique. The shows are built that way," he said.

The costumes are handmade by workers in a Montreal costume shop. Most outfits take 80 to 120 hours to build, but the Old Bird outfits are so ornate, they require almost 200 hours.

"The colors of the costumes and makeup are just gorgeous," said Craig Price, who saw a Cirque show about 10 years ago in Denver. He's the performing arts director at the Center for the Arts of Bonita Springs as well as an actor at Naples' Sugden Theatre.

"It was just beautiful to the point I was mesmerized," he said.

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