

Cirque Du Soleil and Kinetic Arts Fall Deep Into the Dark Pleasures Of Circus



Ugo Laffolay will get higher and higher in Cirque du Soleil's 'Luzia.' (Photo: Courtesy of the Company)

By John Wilkins
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Editor's Note: This review was written before a [Cirque du Soleil technician was killed](#) during a show Tuesday night (Nov. 29). The show is on hiatus until further notice.

Why the circus is fascinating remains a grand riddle. The emotions elicited by the art form are often so wild and contradictory that all you want is to harmonize them and find your way back to the normal, everyday world. Both Cirque du Soleil's *Luzia* — *A Waking Dream Of Mexico* and the Kinetic Arts Center's *Circus Disobedience: Inversion* hint at the answer to that riddle, while still keeping it a secret. Like the mystery of the Sphinx and our dreams, everything we need to know is right in front of us.

Cirque du Soleil's *Luzia* begins in terror. An airplane explodes, and a clown, the incredible, dough-faced Eric Koller, falls through the sky. Perhaps only a clown would find such a situation delightful, as the smiling Koller does here. He has a parachute, but soon loses it to a seagull. So things get worse fast, as well as more interesting.

The clown pulls out a paper umbrella, which is the type of last-minute reprieve often imagined in a dream. Will it save him, or slow him down just enough to make his last moments of life more terrifying? The collective groan of the audience suggests the latter. And you think, well, at least he's going to Mexico, which is where he was heading, though not quite in the way that he planned.

It's a beautiful start, and catches why this so-called family-friendly art form can often reach frightening levels of disturbance. Its fantasies are all encompassing — I can fall from a plane and live! — but death is always lurking, and not the kind where one goes to sleep and gently drifts away. So when our clown lands in a field of flowers, it's both a brief respite from terror, and miraculous. And no circus worth its price of admission should ever leave either of those two states for long.



The running butterfly woman (Shelli Epstein) touches down in Cirque du Soleil's 'Luzia.' (Photo: Courtesy of the Company)

So almost immediately, a butterfly woman appears running through the air, her wings gigantic and fragile. She touches down on, of all things, an airport moving walkway — the kind that you glide on when you have too much luggage or just want to get a kick out of walking fast.

The walkway, all straight lines, rotates in perfect circles on the mechanical stage. As right angles suddenly become circles and back again, the cast performs one of the most ornate series of hoop dives I've ever seen. You can almost feel the rules of geometry bend in front of you, as the perpendicular lines of the acrobats on the walkway defy and meld with the circular, rotating stage.

At the finish of this improbability, Eric the clown is off again, leading us through a Mexico that only a tourist would dream of. In the woods where three women fly above the trees; on a movie set where the star balances on building blocks that take him higher and higher and higher; and finally to the "Swing to Swing," a rather brutal contraption that hurls the performers wildly into the air.



It's a full-blown fantasy of transcendence flecked with shards of reality as cutting as glass. Unbelievable, thrilling, and awful, I was relieved when this "waking dream" of Mexico was over and that it never became the nightmare that it so often threatens to become.

Some terrifying acrobatics in Cirque du Soleil's 'Luzia.' (Photo: Courtesy of the Company)



(L to R) TT Robson, Julie Rogers, and Lillian Ferreira hang in unison in Kinetic Arts' 'Inversion,' directed and conceived by Jaron Hollander. (Photo: Eric Gillet)

The performers in *Inversion* aren't on the level of the ones in Cirque du Soleil. But they're quite good, and it's a thrill to see them in the Kinetic Arts Center's 150-seat warehouse space.

Before the show properly begins, two clowns — brilliantly played throughout by Slater Penny and Julie Rogers — kind of mess around with the audience. It all seems a goof, and hardly worthy of grand ideas such as “disobedience” and “inversion.” But a good circus is always one step ahead of us.

The show starts with a full cast dance number and when the performers stand before us, you realize that artistic director Jaron Hollander's notion of the circus is much closer to theater than is Cirque du Soleil's. Here, we're confronted with character types, not categories of performers. There's an angry teen, an anarchist punk, a conservative Republican family, a Ring Mistress with a whip, a little girl, and two fairies — one kind of devilish and the other a bit of an angel.

As these types perform for us, they're transformed by what they do. One of the most startling moments of *Inversion* is Elliott Gittelsohn and Dwoira Galilea's contortion act. It's not just that they're twisting their bodies in ways that defy basic biology; it's that by doing so, their Republican identities implode while they contort. You feel how liberating talent, skill, and dedication are, and how their mere expression takes on an anarchic, uncontrollable force.

Unlike most circuses, there are no obvious signals about what's going to happen next and who is going to do what. Ross Travis' anarchist punk flies up and down a metal pole the way most of us lean against a wall. Even after you begin to expect his oddball attacks on gravity, it's still hard to anticipate.

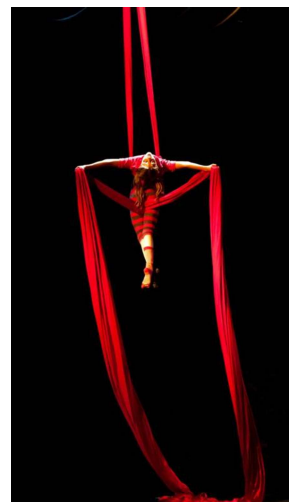
You would never guess that Erin \$hredder's Ring Mistress would rise in the air while twirling a dazzling array of luminescent hula-hoops, nor think that the angelic TT Robson could catch people in free fall with her feet, or believe that our casual clowns, so loose and natural, can scurry up dangling ropes and twirl in the air like mechanical whirligigs.

Nothing is as it seems. So even though the revolutionary ideals of *Inversion* are quite tame, the show is nonetheless wildly explosive. Hollander has invested the whole piece with a verve and surprise that is beautiful and human. When the ending comes, it is both obvious and unbelievable. It's both what we would expect and yet never imagine.

The whole cast gets in the act as if they were all taking turns playing lead guitar in the happiest garage band in the world. And for one glorious moment — a slow motion fight set to William Tell's *Overture of 1812* — everything feels as if it's upside down.

So the riddle of the circus is always partial and right before us: people are miraculous and fragile; they dream of the impossible and make it come true. It's just that no matter how wonderful the outcome, everyone finally falls to the ground. And then the lights go out.

Julie Rogers takes a twirl in Kinetic Art's 'Inversion' directed and conceived by Jaron Hollander. (Photo: Eric Gillet)



'Inversion' runs through Sunday, Dec. 18 at the Kinetic Arts Center in Oakland. For tickets and information, [click here](#).