



MONDAY, MAY 06, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

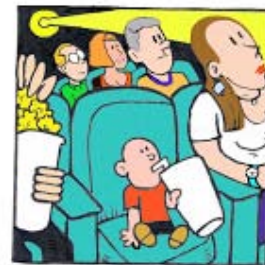
## THEATER: CIRQUE DU SOLEIL GETS ITS MOJO BACK

**CIRQUE DU SOLEIL: LUZIA -- A WAKING DREAM OF MEXICO** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**NEXT TO CITI FIELD IN QUEENS, NYC**

I skipped the last few Cirque du Soleil shows that passed through New York City. After revolutionizing the circus, this Montreal-based company fell into a bit of a rut. Every show was an amorphous, New Age-y sort of experience. Worse, they kept trying to shoehorn a collection of fine circus acts (trapeze work, juggling and the like) into a narrative. This misguided idea about how to keep their shows fresh culminated in the godawful Broadway show *Paramour*. Perhaps that disaster sobered the company up. That show was followed immediately by this one, which comes to the city three years after its debut in Montreal. *Luzia* runs through June 9 before moving on to Connecticut, Canada and then London's Royal Albert Hall in January.

Here Cirque breaks its own "rules" but far more effectively. They take inspiration from a particular country, in this case Mexico. That gives the costumes and colors a focus their more outlandish and conceptually vague shows lack. Many of the songs are sung in Spanish, rather than just the usual made-up Cirque nonsense language meant to be "exotic" and yet not alienate any of its worldwide audience. (Sure, a number of tunes are still vocalized with wordless ooh-oohing, but it's an improvement.) Plus the score is bursting with brass that -- again -- step away from New Age and create a friendlier, livelier more human vibe.

Indeed, the entire show has a warm, inviting feel that draws the audience in. It's human-scaled and all the better for it. This video gives highlights of the many acts on display.



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I wasn't surprised for a second by anything in *Luzia* but I smiled with pleasure the entire time. A treadmill is used effectively early on. A woman/butterfly runs forward as her wings fill up the stage and a *War Horse*-like puppet of a stallion gallops behind her. It's not ground-breaking or unusual in any way -- just a lovely, simple effect. The same goes for the troupe (my favorite of the lot) dressed in bird-like costumes who tumble through hoops as those move forward and backward along the treadmill. One or two or three hoops are stacked up, while tumblers go alone or two or three at a time in both directions. Again, the routine is simplicity itself but done with elegance and charm. Of course, I say "simple" but of course it's only simple for folk who devote a lifetime to developing their skills and their bodies. (Many performers come from Eastern Europe, which boasts a deep circus tradition while others were competitive gymnasts, swimmers, wrestlers and the like in college.)

Start to finish, *Luzia* has an easy charm. True, it never wowed me with some outrageous never-seen-before feat of derring-do. But I don't relish truly death-defying acts for my afternoon's entertainment so that low-key vibe was a bonus. While the clown act usually had me cringing over his "antics" in Cirque shows from the past, *Luzia's* performer was top-notch, especially in an act-one bit where he engaged the audience in a beach ball competition. When a juggler had a disastrous outing (he lost his rhythm early on and dropped pins four or five times), it was a welcome reminder how difficult their skills are. And while the contortionist appearing towards the climax was unsettling rather than entertaining (he seemed more appropriate for Coney Island), his big routine was staged beautifully with a parade of performers placing candles all around the stage while the lights dimmed.

If an aerialist dipping into a pool of water proved kitschy (his Fabio-like hair was flipped so often and so dramatically it deserved its own trailer backstage), this was all part of the fun. A curtain of water also played a prominent role throughout the show and created some very cool cascading pictures indeed. At the end, the cast gathered around a

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table to celebrate and even this felt right, especially how they froze into place at various points to allow the clown a final bit of nonsense. If you've never been to Cirque du Soleil or, like me, you took a break when it became repetitive or just too omnipresent, *Luzia* is a good reminder of why they conquered the world in the first place.

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