

Cultural Daily

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Cirque du Soleil Celebrates Diversity in VOLTA

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, February 19th, 2020

The circus is back in town. Cirque du Soleil, that is. Le Grand Chapiteau! That thrilling Canadian import that revolutionized the Big Top and put the focus on humans performing extraordinary feats instead of exploiting animals. I've been attending Cirque du Soleil for over a decade, and await each iteration with the same anticipation and delight I experienced since my first trip to the more conventional circus (Barnum & Bailey) as a child. Of course, now I'm an adult and I get to see the looks of wonder on the faces of children, some of them infants not yet old enough to speak. Truth be told, no matter your age, whether you're in a stroller or a walker, Cirque du Soleil never ceases to enthrall and amaze. And the older we get, and the more grim life around us seems, the more vital it is to have that spark of youthful wonder reawakened.



Waz performs aerial feats on his path to enlightenment.

Each Cirque du Soleil show is conceived and developed around a conceptual framework and story with a fantastical array of characters who bring that vision to life. Cirque's latest offering VOLTA taps into a particularly relevant theme for our times. Volta is a celebration of diversity and individuality which can seem like an endangered species in today's tech-obsessed, social media saturated culture where reality shows reign supreme, elevating fame and celebrity as the be-all, end-all. Volta also takes aim at technology which purports to improve our lives, but only seems to be isolating and alienating us from one another. Though there's no dialogue, the narrative is told visually through the physical feats of its company and accompanied by an original musical score.



BMX riders perform spectacular stunts in Volta.

While you can get the gist of the narrative thread by simply watching the story unfold visually, you can find a more explicit description of what the producers had in mind by going to the Cirque du Soleil website. Volta features a young man named Waz who is striving for fame and acceptance in a reality show competition called *The Mr. Wow Show* which has all the hype and hysteria of a super-charged *America's Got Talent* on steroids. The frenzied depiction presents a not-so funhouse mirror of our national obsession with fame and celebrity and the dangers inherent in our seemingly insatiable need for validation. Mr. Wow, the host and emcee of the competition, is the embodiment of the empty pursuit of fame at the expense of our humanity and individuality. Dressed in a blinged-out, sparkling gold jacket, Mr. Wow wields the power to make or break the contestants' fortunes. Waz wins Mr. Wow's approval, but when Mr. Wow removes the cap from Waz's head, revealing a shock of unruly blue hair, Waz feels the judgment of the world upon him and retreats.

From here, we're introduced to the other players who round out this metaphorical landscape. On one hand, you have the Greys, who represent the masses, constricted by their blind adherence to convention. They go through life in a kind of stupor, their eyes glued to their cell phones, slaves to technology. The Greys are caught up in the glitz and the spectacle, but they are, for all intents and purposes, leading empty and soulless lives, going through the motions without fully experiencing life as sentient beings. During his journey of self-discovery, Waz encounters a free-spirited woman on rollerskates named Ela. Dressed in a veritable rainbow of multi-colored garb, she represents a way out of the world of the Greys toward self-expression. She represents the Freespirits, those who have broken free of conformity and embraced their individuality. The Freespirits draw Waz into their world with a series of life-affirming adventures including a particularly riveting display of acrobatic prowess with an elaborate trampoline routine.

While I'll admit I've grown a bit jaded over the years, expecting the Cirque shows to keep raising the bar and showing me something I haven't seen before, they always seem to win me over. Because the narrative is told visually, there's a lot of symbolism at work in a Cirque du Soleil show. This is demonstrated early on as Waz does some dazzling aerial work suspended from an antique red lamp. It's a striking image as he spins in search of the metaphorical lighted journey. There's usually at least one signature piece which stands out. For me, it was "Mirage" — the woman seated in the lotus position who's suspended by her hair (or perhaps more accurately, her head) as she spins and levitates to the accompaniment of the rapturous Cirque score, conveying a mystical, hypnotic effect. The other set piece that ties directly into the narrative is the Cube, described on the Cirque website as a magic box where past and present collide. The Cube functions as an old-style home movie projector which allows Waz to go back in time to his childhood and replay the formative influences and reconnect with his past. Volta also features an extended foray into the world of BMX. For those unfamiliar with the term, BMX is an abbreviation for Bicycle Motocross, which gained popularity in the '70s as an alternative to conventional cycling, focusing on freestyle and daredevil stunts. Volta incorporates a full-scale BMX park with 6 transparent polycarbonate ramps which bring the audience right into the action, so you can witness the stunts and tricks right before your eyes. It's a rip-roaring climax to a kaleidoscope of fun, sure to draw the next generation of BMX enthusiasts into the sport.

Volta plays now through March 8th at Dodger Stadium before moving on to Costa Mesa from March 18th to April 19th. Act now, or you'll have to book a flight to Denver or Portland for their next stops.

Photo credits: Matt Beard

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