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Cirque du Soleil still has tricks up its sleeve

By WENDELL BROCK
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To the naysayers and crusty curmudgeons, the seen-'em-all cynics who think the Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil has exploited every trick in the circus vocabulary: Have we got a surprise for you.

"Kooza," the show that opened Friday night at Atlantic Station, is not a lose-uh. Though the showcase of daring athleticism and old-fashioned carnival slapstick may not live up to the painterly elegance of 2006's "Corteo," the latest Cirque offering claims some of the most daring gymnastic showmanship I have ever witnessed.

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Louie Favorite/lfavorite@ajc.com
Anthony Gatto doing his juggling during dress rehearsal for Cirque du Soleil's 'Kooza' at Atlantic Station.

Live performance is always a risky affair; mistakes can happen in the blink of an eye. "Kooza" is physical theater in the extreme. Here, the whimsy and ribaldry and ridiculous clowns are mere distractions from the dangerous dance of death executed by a company of mesmerizing athletes.

Wusses beware. Not every trick lands perfectly, and the suspense level consistently operates from a place of pure fear. While some acts are seamless, others occasionally lose their grip, and audience members are perpetually harangued by pickpockets, policemen and a parade of buffoons who are happy to take a leaf-blower to a cup of popcorn.

Cirque has never been strong on narrative. In the threadbare conceit that is "Kooza," a lost, kite-bearing Innocent (Stephan Landry) falls into the clutch of marauding Trickster (Justin Sullivan). For the next 2 1/2 hours, he witnesses all manner of magic, music and mayhem.

While Yao Deng Bo stacks his chairs to tent-kissing heights, juggler Anthony Gatto preens in a shiny silver outfit and never drops a hoop, ball or pin. Unicyclist Yuri Shavro, meanwhile, manages to cut wheelies as acrobat Diana Aleshchenko perches upside down from his waist.

Things get dicier when a high-wire athlete attempts to jump over a partner. Ooops. Later, in the same sequence, a guy sits in a chair balanced atop a pole that's ferried across the wire by a pair of bicyclists. Got that? And in the precarious "Wheel of Death" routine, Jimmy Ibarra Zapata and Carlos Enrique Marin Loaiza ride the inner and outer edges of a pair of enormous spinning wheels. They jump rope. They defy gravity. Occasionally, they appear in danger of falling out of orbit or missing their touchdown. Feets, don't fail me now.

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Cirque apparently can't put on a show without a clutch of darling little contortionists. The trio assembled here never disappoints. But what's so new and original about these wee women pretzels?

As the story moves through time, set designer Stephane Roy offers a ballooning tent and a two-tiered bandstand that lighting designer Martin Labrecque bathes in gorgeous red hues. Composer Jean-François Cote samples everything from New Age fluff to a hard-driving propulsive rock score.

Garishness has always been a trademark of the Cirque brand, and Marie-Chantale Vaillancourt's outlandish costumes are no exception. Drawing from a mishmash of global looks, she references everything from traditional Mongolian garments to harlequin stripes to Day of the Dead skeletons.

"Kooza" is not a cerebral show, and yet it is. In pushing the human body to remarkable extremes, it can't help but tickle the brain.

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