

BIGGER THAN VEG

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL'S AUDACIOUS NEW SHOW PROVES THAT IT'S THE SUREST



AS

BET IN SHOW BIZ



T H E A T E R

By RICHARD CORLISS LAS VEGAS

THE BIG BATTLE IS ABOUT TO begin—good guys on one side, bad guys on the other. They advance and clash, executing kung-furious feats of acrobatic derring-do. It's like a Hong Kong action film, but every take has to be perfect. It's being done live, in a theater at Las Vegas' MGM Grand, so any misstep could injure a performer and kill the flow of the drama. Moreover, the battlefield is a large platform that has been tilted 80°, a nearly vertical position. That gives the audience a unique, God's-eye view of the action, but it's hell for the performers, who must fight to keep their balance—or off they plunge into the void.

Kà, the Cirque du Soleil show that opened last week, is the latest, largest demonstration that the Quebec company—which began as a circus with no animals—has become the gold standard for live entertainment. Like a circus, Kà showcases jaw-dropping acrobatic feats, but it cradles them in outsize theatrical wizardry: a huge stage space with many scene changes and a theater designed to suit the show, with side balconies from which the performers can fly over the audience. Like a Broadway show, Kà has a plot, a dozen or more characters and a sonorous score. It blends these two forms and extends them with the company's determination to create something new under the Las Vegas sun—a spectacle of burly martial arts contained in a tender love story.

The battlefield climax to Kà is merely one of the show's hundred or so impossible epiphanies. A royal barge revolves on a placid sea; a boat rocks wildly and sinks; a woman plunges 70 ft. and is dragged back up; a beach suddenly comes to life with an acrobatic starfish and contortionist crabs; a forest of metal tubes features a giant stick bug, a scorpion and an 80-ft. snake; a tepee turns into a man-powered flying machine; actors scale a sheer cliff, an icy mountain—all onstage.

Except there is no stage—anyway, not a stable floor. Instead, a void, out of which some ethereal miracles materialize. Many of them take place on two huge surfaces: a 1,250-sq.-ft., 175-ton slab (known as the

ROMP AND PAGEANTRY: Members of the royal household strut their stuff

CAST OF KÀ-RACTERS: From bottom, the Forest People, the Valets, and the Chief Archer and his hero-rescuing daughter





THE SPERMEN: MICHAEL FISHER

sand-cliff deck) and a smaller one (the 900-sq.-ft., 40-ton tatami deck) that can simultaneously lift, rotate and tilt. Thus the actors must perform many of their maneuvers while the earth is literally moving under their feet. (If they fall off, there's a 60-ft. drop out of sight and onto an airbag.) Other scenes occur in midair, with the actors on wires or clinging to poles. That lends an antigravitational buoyancy to an artistic enterprise that revels in breaking all the rules about what technology can achieve and the human body can endure.

Cirque has come a long way since 1984, when Guy Laliberté and his Quebec City commune of street mimes and still walkers created a new kind of circus. Then, beginning in 1993, came Cirque's three Vegas shows—*Mystère* (bigger and better), *O* (just add water) and *Zumanity* (with a little sex). They revolutionized and co-opted Las Vegas entertainment. The city's upscale hotels now want a Cirque-style show rather than the older showgirl revue or visiting headliner. The town's other hot ticket, *Celine Dion: A New Day*, is utterly in the Cirque style (its director, Franco Dragone, helmed the first 10 Cirque shows), though on an even more gigantic scale. And when Steve Wynn, the entrepreneur who brought Cirque to the Strip, opens his new hotel in April, Dragone's *La Réte* will be the permanent attraction.

Cirque's Vegas negotiations go like this: Laliberté presents the gargantuan budget for a new show, and the town's most powerful men say yes. The moguls aren't being profligate. The shows are as close to a sure thing as there is in Vegas. *Mystère*, after 11 years, still sells more than 90% of its tickets, "which is unseen in our [Vegas] industry," says Cirque's Daniel Lamarre. *O* sells out all its shows every week, *Zumanity* virtually all. A year after *Zumanity* opened at New York-

THE WAITING GAME:
The Spearman, above,
and the Nursemaid,
right, prepare for the
high jinks onstage

New York, the casino has improved its profitability 20%. It's anticipated that *Kà* will return \$40 million in profit next year—\$20 million to MGM and \$20 million to Cirque.

And it's not just Vegas. The company's permanent shows (four in Sin City and another in Florida's Walt Disney World) and five traveling tent shows have a combined box-office gross of about \$500 million a year. That's roughly half Broadway's total annual take.

Since Laliberté, 45, is the company's sole owner, he is a very rich man—but he is also a restless one. No one gets tired of the Cirque formula faster than Laliberté and his co-creators, Gilles Ste.-Croix and Guy Caron. For *Kà*, Caron roamed the world for six months, looking for specific circus acts that would fit into the larger scheme. The team loves to innovate and, with the hottest tickets in Vegas, they can afford to. *Kà*, at \$165 million, is the most expensive theatrical extravaganza this side of a Donald Trump wedding.

Laliberté encouraged the largely outside creative team—including playwright and director Robert Lepage, stage designer Mark Fisher (who has created rock-concert environments for Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones and U2), choreographer Jacques Heim (leader of the Diavolo dance troupe) and puppet designer Michael Curry (Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*)—to



unfurl ambitions that might make even the Cirque staff shiver.

What's new about *Kà*? Just about everything. To start, it's the first Cirque show with a plot. Lots of it—too much, really, to comprehend in a single viewing. In barest form, it's the story of twin princelings, a boy and a girl (played by sisters Sheri and Jennifer Haight), who are separated during an attack on the royal family and meet many outlandish creatures while they try to elude tattooed toughs led by the Counselor, a yellow-hooded Fu Manchu, and his sexy-punkster son. *Kà* means "duality" in Egyptian, and the plot eventually reconciles brother and sister, sea and sand, earth and sky.

Also space-age technology and Stone Age storytelling. In Japanese, *kà* can mean "fire," and Lepage sees fire as "the birth of performance." In prehistoric times, people would sit in a cave around a fire and, says Lepage, "one day, a guy stands up, and the shadow behind him on the wall is the first form of using technology to tell a story." That notion in-

spires one of *Kà*'s loveliest moments: the male twin and his court jester make shadow puppets—a rabbit, a dog, a bird—on the wall. Simple magic. So is a dance, by Noriko Takahashi, as the daughter of the Counselor's chief archer, that expresses the purest love through the choreographer's art and the dancer's plangent grace. Behind the scenes, *Kà* is dizzyingly complicated, with a crew of 165, including technicians who operate the gurney crane that moves the platforms and stagehands who prowl the 60-ft.-deep backstage area. But the technology doesn't overwhelm the action or the performers; it enables them.

That is the Cirque secret: rendering the undoable beautiful. Aiming for the highest common denominator, Cirque makes nearly every other form of entertainment seem timid, sullen, earthbound. *Kà* flies at its own giddy altitude and takes you along for the ride. If you catch the import of every gesture and plot point, fine. If not, you can still feel the lift and thrust, the vertiginous thrill. Either way, it's quite a trip, one that turns an evening at the theater into an exalting hallucination. *Kà* induces rapture.

—With reporting by
Steven Frank/Las Vegas