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'Cirque Ingenieux' Offers Some Ooohs, Some Awwws

By **Misha Berson**
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----- Theater review

"Cirque Ingenieux." Directed by Joe Leonardo. At the Paramount Theatre, 911 Pine St., Seattle, through Sunday. \$19.50-35.50. 206-292-ARTS. -----

There are many ways to do a nouvelle one-ring circus.

If you are the hot French-Canadian troupe Cirque du Soleil, you combine thrilling feats of derring-do with arresting music and visuals. If you are New York's Big Apple Circus or San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus, you include the skill acts, but also rely on boisterous, American-style clowning and feel-good charm.

And if you are Cirque Ingenieux, created by Neil Goldberg and re-packaged as a national touring attraction by commercial producer Kenneth Gentry?

You pour on smoke and lasers, hook the acrobatic and aerial acts to an inconsequential fable and bombard all of it with an overwrought New Age musical score that would make John Tesh run for cover.

Cirque Ingenieux is back in Seattle with the same show (though a somewhat different cast) that it brought to the Moore Theatre in 1997. This time it's playing the larger Paramount Theatre, through Sunday.

This is my first look at the troupe and I hoped for more of the enchantment, the international flavor and phantasmagorical sensibility other new-wave circuses have regaled me with.

But despite glossy trappings and some highly skilled performers, Cirque Ingenieux's two-hour show often feels overblown and pre-fab, a ponderous affair when it should be flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

Children and adults can still ooh and aah over virtuoso individual bits, especially the Polish "strong man" artistry of Jaroslaw Marciniak and Dariusz Wronski. Bald and bare-muscled, bathed in pale-pink light, these two remarkable human specimens cast a hypnotic spell as they slowly balance one another hand-to-hand, head-to-head, sole-to-sole, at impossible angles.

There's also expert Hula-Hoop twirling by Irina Burdetskaya, a voluptuous rope act by Brigette Scherrer and various contortion, juggling and aerial stunts that impress.

But it's all wrapped up in a vague, flaccid, Alice-in-Wonderland story about a young girl named Sarah (Ekaterina Fedosseeva) who sees her first big-top show and gets lifted high into Circus Heaven on a silver hoop.

Guided by an angel (Jennifer Hamady), who periodically sings an incomprehensible aria, Sarah visits several magic realms that catalyze her own circus ambitions. These are largely conjured by noted set-designer Jerome Sirlin's slide imagery, projected onto a series of filmy curtains. Though abetted by loads of smoke and Howell Binkley's gaudy lighting, the visuals aren't as fluid or captivating as expected. More diverting are Jonathan Bixby's fanciful costumes.

The story line suggests an ethereal journey, so why does Cirque Ingenieux bog down so much? One culprit is the over-amplified, overbearing music by Japanese pop composer Kitaro, performed by Jose M. Cancela via deluxe-model synthesizer. (Some of it sounds like electronic Liberace, some like synthetic pile-driving.)

An odder lapse is the way choreographer Catherine Archambault and director Joe Leonardo stage the skill acts. There's little suspense in these displays of physical grace and prowess. Instead of building up to the big pay-off, they tend to peak early and sort of fizzle.

That's even true of the show's most famous routine. Aerialist Jean Chiasson hoists himself into the air on two hanging strips of white chiffon and wind-surfs high above the stage, whirling and floating, at one point becoming the prow of an imagined sky ship. It's fitfully stunning. But the act would make an even bigger impression if more ingeniously handled - like so much of Cirque Ingenieux.

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