



THEATER REVIEW | 'ABSINTHE'/'LA VIE'

Under an Alternative Big Top, Acrobatics of the Adults-Only Variety

By JASON ZINOMAN Published: July 12, 2007

The disreputable glamour of the circus, longtime home of the outcast, the runaway and the freak, has faded over the years, as the big top has increasingly become either blandly wholesome or pretentiously arty.

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Richard Termine for The New York Times At South Street Seaport, Spiegelworld features two shows that translate European decadence into a raunchy American aesthetic. Wanda and Jean-Pierre Poissonnet in "Absinthe." More Photos »

But the seedy spirit of the circus of yesteryear is making a comeback in the most unusual of places. Behind a shopping mall, tucked into the corner of the South Street Seaport, is Spiegelworld, which is presenting among its acts a family-unfriendly one-ring circus featuring two separate shows that translate European decadence into a raunchy American aesthetic. It may not amount to the greatest show on earth, but it could be the dirtiest.

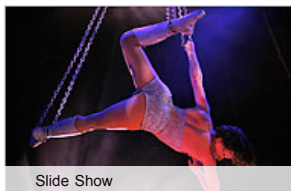
Forget lumbering animals or long-faced clowns. But "Absinthe," produced last year and returning with a new cast, has a little bit of everything else — except a coherent narrative. There's knife juggling, a gender-bending cabaret act, a woman in a giant bubble and every simulated sexual act you can think of.

Even if the high-flying stunts become repetitive, they are really more about abs (and other body parts) than acrobatics. Spry female contortionists pause from their rubbery moves to trade sultry glances; a perfectly sculptured boxer douses himself with water before spiraling in the air like an airplane shot out of the sky. These naughty acrobats seem cast as much for their hard bodies as their considerable skills.

The suggestiveness is no subtler in the comic interludes, which include some insult humor by the Gazillionaire (Voki Kalsayan), a borscht-belt businessman, and a sendup of Cirque de Soleil, which arguably did more to ruin the bad name of the circus than anything else.

"La Vie," less action-packed than "Absinthe" but with a clearer conceit, begins with a man (Patrick Léonard) plummeting seemingly from nowhere onto a bed. We soon discover that not only is he dead, the rest of us are too. The host of this trip through the afterlife is an obnoxious

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Richard Termine for The New York Times
Isabelle Chassé puts a twist (and then some) on the circus in "La Vie," a part of the Spiegelworld festival at the South Street Seaport. [More Photos >](#)

— and French — bull of a man (Sebastien Soldevila) who informs the audience that they are in Purgatory. A fierce master of ceremonies, he introduces a wild-faced and astoundingly flexible contortionist (Isabelle Chassé) wrapped in a straitjacket, and a flight attendant (Shana

Carroll) on a trapeze.

The show, with images of asylums and Kafkaesque bureaucracy, occasionally veers into Blue Man Group territory. (It might be time to retire blowing on giant tubes, which is fast losing its novelty.) Mr. Soldevila and Mr. Léonard show amazing teamwork with a juggling act involving a spinning top and a wire that ends with several highly unlikely feats of hand-eye coordination. Mr. Soldevila pauses for applause. "I know, I know," he says. "I am very good."

He's right, of course. But what really makes these Spiegelworld productions such unusual, exciting and slightly uneasy experiences is their intimacy. When an acrobat hangs precariously by a chain right above your head, it's difficult to be a passive observer. And the performers in both shows make an effort, like it or not, to include the crowd.

That's not to say that everyone will have a topless beauty fall into his lap or, perhaps less pleasingly, a greasy-haired degenerate slurp on his toes — as happened to one critic from The Associated Press on the night I attended. If you don't like audience participation, best keep your shoes tied tightly.

"Absinthe" and "La Vie" run separately through Sept. 30 at the South Street Seaport, Pier 17; (212) 279-4200, spiegelworld.com.

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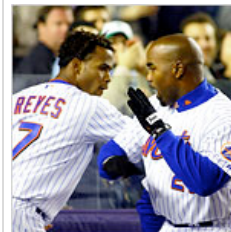
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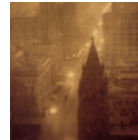
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