

Celestial bodies

Marianka Swain was wowed by Circa's *How Like An Angel* at London's St-Bartholomew-the-Great on June 27

Britain is becoming increasingly secular. Last year, a ComRes poll showed a rise in avowed atheism from 14 per cent in 1963 to 42 per cent, with 54 per cent saying they'd visit a Church of England building for architectural reasons rather than spiritual ones. Perhaps, in these turbulent, cynical times, we find it harder to believe in miracles.

How extraordinary, then, to experience something truly deserving of the adjectives we use so often, so unthinkingly – amazing, awe-inspiring, miraculous, sublime. The Australian contemporary circus company Circa, which has fought to redefine circus as an art form, furthered its quest by teaming up with British vocal ensemble I Fagiolini and, in a real masterstroke, using the grandeur of a 12th-century church as the setting for their jaw-dropping work.

In this promenade performance, the audience had an inescapably immersive experience, with both singers and acrobats walking among us. Our natural British reserve made this a tad awkward at first; by the end, as Circa's six talented members processed from the altar balancing on one another's shoulders, we parted as naturally as the Red Sea.

Photograph © Charlotte Vogel



How Like An Angel

Musical director Jonathan Holloway aimed to explore the flow of energy from one ensemble to the other, and the real joy of *How Like An Angel* was the extent of that harmonisation: Circa with I Fagiolini, and each of them with us.

Dance has benefited hugely from its presence on screen, but you can't beat the thrill of live performance, particularly in such an intimate setting. We were close enough to see both the exceptional combination of strength and fluidity and the commitment needed to achieve it.

Right above our heads, Bridie Hooper twisted and writhed on a ribbon in a series of breathtaking tumbling rotations and had us on tenterhooks as she hung suspended by the tips of her toes, yet after she safely dismounted, she gasped, spent – and we were too. Circa trade in inhuman movement, with a very human emotional availability.

Billie Wilson-Coffey's ribbon number was no less mesmerising, as she drew our eyes to the heavens with her exquisite lines, even as strands of hair came loose and her face contorted in effort – the perfect embodiment of agony and ecstasy. Her pas de deux with Rowan Heydon-White, who impressed throughout with her graceful strength, brimmed over with emotion as their bodies were contorted by a soulful solo.

There was also sly wit in Yaron Lifschitz's choreography, such as the clever group number involving human pyramids and precarious bowls of water to accompany Josquin des Prés's haunting *Agnus Dei* – the dance equivalent of hard-earned baptism. Our preconceptions of pole dancing were shattered by a heart-stopping trio, the performers spiralling and feeding themselves through one another before plunging to earth, their shadows dancing on the ancient stone walls behind them.

However, the most effective moment came in stillness, as one man stood on the top level, preparing to take a leap of faith. It was the literal pinnacle of a virtuoso chamber piece that reminded us that art has the power to be transcendental. ●