

LE FREAK, C'EST CHIC

Cirque du Soleil in *Quidam*, at the Royal Albert Hall on January 7, wows **Marianka Swain**



Quidam's Statue

This obtusely-titled show follows a long tradition of children swapping indifferent parents for magical worlds, here opening with a Dalí-esque dreamscape: an entire living room taking flight, and a perpetually newspaper-reading father walking on air, paper plastered to his face.

However, story isn't Cirque du Soleil's strong suit, so plot is soon abandoned, leaving incomprehensible background players distracting from the acts in an otherwise slick production from director Franco Dragone and choreographer Debra Brown. Like a jukebox musical attempting narrative, sometimes it's best to let the hits speak for themselves.

And what hits they are: 11 jaw-dropping acts putting a new twist on old tricks. Cory Sylvester makes a gymnastic wheel effortlessly cool, balancing on the frame through risky rotations and bouncing in and out of elegant flips, while diabolo artist Wei Liang Lin combines musicality and swagger, whirling the bright-green spool around his dancing limbs and then adding another, and another, until they're a haze of colour, like a weather vane spinning madly in a gale.

The house troupe brings high-voltage teamwork to skipping ropes: Double Dutch ropes blur as magnetic Norihisa Taguchi tumbles in double, triple time, and a thrillingly co-ordinated group trade push-ups and jump splits. Their

encore, *Banquine*, features impossible human pyramids, simultaneous throws, and the *Dirty Dancing* lift achieved by a man standing on top of two others, the girl flying into his outstretched hands.

The aerial displays are magnificent against the hall's dome, fearless performers appearing like gods in the heavens. With no safety net, there's a gripping sense of jeopardy, balanced by the alien beauty of the movement.

Danila Bim, Laís Camila and Lisa Skinner bring gorgeous shaping and pin-sharp synchronisation to their hoop turn, while the Spanish web artists seamlessly switch positions mid-air before unleashing their strength in a canon of spiralling. Most astonishing is rubber-limbed Julie Cameron, who marries eye-watering contortion with emotional commitment,

white limbs gleaming against blood-red silk in one extraordinary act of expression.

Not every piece is a winner, with Patrick MacGuire's juggling predictable and lacklustre Anna Ostapenko marking a series of poses. Curiously, the showstopper is the most stripped-back: Statue's Yves Decoste and Valentyna Sidenko enjoined in exquisite harmony. Never losing their connection, they unfurl into strange shapes, necks welded as they stretch into an upside-down lift that is a perfect, utterly surreal mirror image. It's partnering at its spine-tingling extreme: two performers combining to create liquid fire.

Cirque's Vegas acrobatics may lack theatrical cohesion, but for sheer wonder, this is simply unbeatable. ●

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Quidam's aerial hoops act