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STAGE REVIEW: New Cirque Polynesia brings a touch of Vegas

By SKY BARNHART, Contributing Writer

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"No way!" I thought. "She's not going to" And then she did.

Dangling upside down by one ankle 40 feet over the stage, Lyric Wallenda whirled her mother, Rietta, around and around in the air by her neck. It looked unreal, like one of those movie spoofs where the poor woman being tossed around is actually a doll. But this was real. This was serious.

The act was called the "Wallenda Perch" and it was the most stunning-even disturbing-moment of the brand-new Cirque Polynesia show at the Hyatt Regency Maui Resort & Spa.

The Hyatt has gone all out for the six-nights-a-week, 75-minute show featuring international artists in a variety of acts. The vast Monarchy Ballroom has been made over into a more intimate venue, with two levels of open seating in the hotel's banquet chairs.

A painted island backdrop gives a tropical feel to the show, but this is no traditional luau. As the name implies, there is a touch of Polynesia, but it is first and foremost modern-day cirque. Think Vegas with a maile lei.

The evening began with the ringmaster of sorts, Villi the Warrior. In typical Villi style, he warmed up the crowd by bringing audience members onstage for drumming practice. (If you cringe at audience participation, sit in the back.)

A brief theatrical sequence presented the "Polynesians" in exotic feathered costumes and the "Cirques" in metallic bodysuits, but that seemed to be the end of the story line. After regarding each other cautiously, the two groups merged to begin the show.

With flair and skill, the artists took the audience through a carnival of acts, from the Lyra (aerial hoop), flying through the air; to Hand-to-Hand, demonstrating strength and poise. Simple objects like hula hoops and jump ropes were taken to a whole new level-the performers spinning hoops with their knees, toes and hands at the same time; or jumping ropes within ropes.

Simon Arestov's "Rolla Bolla" act was a fun highlight. Wearing a rashguard and boardshorts, he rode onstage atop a wheeled longboard and dropped into a shimmering blue "wave." On a platform at the peak, he built a perilous tower from an assortment of cylinders and boards. It was another "no way" moment as he balanced on the swaying creation and popped up into a perfect handstand, legs silhouetted against the tropical scene.

Other talented Arestovs also took the stage. Simon's parents, Alexandre and Elena, whipped through an amazing array of costumes in split seconds in the Transformation act; and his younger brother Ivan rolled around the stage on the Wheel, a unicycle without a seat.

Meanwhile, "mad percussionist" Daniel Cruces-who composed the original musical score for the show - whailed on his drums in a windblown cubby above the stage.

Just below him, musician Diane Rubio demonstrated a variety of unusual instruments, from the erhu (Chinese violin) to her homemade fue (Japanese flute). During the contortion act, where Gisela Bautista put on a top hat with her feet, Rubio played electric guitar.

Anticipation built when the Wallendas, wearing shiny red bodysuits, started climbing a narrow ladder on one side of the stage. What could they possibly do to top the incredible "Perch"?

The answer was a family tradition: the high wire. Feeling the history of six generations of Wallendas before them, mother and daughter readied their long balance poles and crossed the thin wire with steady, measured steps. There were gasps from the audience as Lyric set a chair on the wire and Rietta climbed onto it, their only safety net the outstretched arms of Villi and Alexandre far below.

Once they were back on solid ground, we could all breathe again. As I rubbed my own neck, stiff from craning up at the high wire, I imagined how Rietta's must feel from the nightly spinning.

Article Photos



Cirque Polynesia photo

A performer takes the hula hoop to new levels at the new Cirque Polynesia show.

Fact Box

* Cirque Polynesia runs at 7 p.m. six nights a week (Tuesdays are dark). There will be two special matinee performances at 2 p.m. this Saturday and next Saturday, June 13. Tickets start at \$62 for adults, with special rates for kama'aina and keiki under 12 (although very young children might be frightened by the loud music and perilous acts). On Saturday, members of Autism Bridges Maui and Best Buddies Hawaii will enjoy a free matinee performance. Dinner packages at 'Umalu are available. For reservations and information, visit www.cirquepolynesia.com or call 667-4540.

The show is still young, and will likely continue to be fine-tuned (as the glossy program, marked up to look like notes by producer Cornell "Tuffy" Nicholas, suggests). The Silks, usually such a lovely act, felt a bit flat; and we couldn't see much of the tumbling in the Russian Swing act before the artists landed in the huge rope net.

The show is something new and different on Maui, something intriguing and a little unsettling and maybe just "Vegas" enough to stir up some interest in these tough times.

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