

# Theater: Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna Far From Full

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**AMALUNA** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### CITIFIELD

Go to the Cirque Du Soleil website and you'll see 20 shows circling the globe under the Cirque banner. It's an impressive roster that attests to how thoroughly this theatrical endeavor has conquered the world with its particular, sophisticated, animal-free celebration of circus-like acrobatics, juggling and feats of physical derring do.

Each show has its own personality and of course they vary in quality. The task for Amaluna and its director (Tony winner Diane Paulus) was to tell an actual story, giving the vague, often New Age-y vibe of this brand more of a structure. Paulus chose Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and has wrapped the usual tumbling and diving and aerial wonders in and out of a very muted attempt to hint at the tale, with Caliban aka Cali (Viktor Kee), Prospero (here Prospera, since the magician is played by Julie McInnes) and two young beauties who fall in love the instant a ship-wrecked Romeo (a strapping Evgeny Kurkin) sees the fetching free spirit Miranda (Luliia Mykhailova) on her lonely island.

Trust me, you needn't know a thing about *The Tempest* in order to watch this show. If you do, the only difference is that occasionally you'll be reminded that, oh yes, this circus act has something or other to do with that tale. (Why not choose something simpler and more universal, like a myth or fairy tale?) As a dramatic story, it's a failure. But then, so are most Cirque shows which often give the impression that something in particular might be going on but settle for atmosphere with the talented performers going about their business while the burblings of some anonymous score continue in the background.

Where Amaluna really falls down is with the acts that are the heart of the show. They are underwhelming to a surprising degree rare for Cirque Du Soleil and the entire evening is poorly paced.

The stage is often dominated by a giant bowl of water. But before that's rolled out, we begin with "Icarians and Water Meteors," a troupe that features women tossing two balls connected by a long rope up in the air while being twirled and balanced on the legs of men lying on the ground. It's a skill that probably takes years to master but we've seen so many similar ones that this fine act feels like a throat clearing at the beginning. Its highlight is one woman who is spun faster and faster in a circle on top of the feet of a man, showing remarkable flexibility made all the more impressive by smiling casually the moment she's back on solid ground.

This is followed by some acrobatics and some clowning. Now clowning is never the strong suit of Cirque Du Soleil, but the duo of Nathalie Cloude and Sheeren Hickman is so utterly devoid of humor and imagination it's almost shocking. Their idea of audience participation late in the show is to bring a guy on stage, have him rock a baby carriage back and forth once or twice like a sitter and then sit him back down again. It's mirthless in the extreme.

Some severe pacing problems continue as Amara DeFilippo does some uninspired ballet style moves for the Peacock Dance. This is immediately followed by aerialist Andreeanne Nadeau performing some typical moves in the air while hovering dramatically over that giant bowl of water. You keep waiting for her to do something astonishing, but ultimately she just twirls her legs in it like a human swizzle stick at her "finale."

This is followed by the hyper-flexible Luliia Mykhailova doing some contortionist tricks along the rim of that bowl. She finally plunges in and it's momentarily pretty but rather anti-climactic -- if sexy -- and then her act is over.

A large troupe of gymnasts come out, with the women dressed in warrior bird-like outfits and loudly "cawing!" and "Cawing!" and "CAWING!!" at the crowd while they do some very basic synchronized moves on parallel bars. Again, you think they'll build to something more impressive but before you know it the very deflating first half is over.

The second act is little better, though it starts somewhat strongly with the male gymnasts coming back out and doing some fun tumbling built around a teeterboard. It's perhaps not wildly original but they have energy and character and play to the crowd, waking everyone up with their enthusiasm and some genuinely challenging material (time and again one of the guys will not quite hit the edge of the teeterboard when landing and they'll scramble to get on target before another gymnast sends them hurtling into the air). It's fun, at least, a rare commodity at this show.

Then comes the unquestioned highlight of Amaluna, an act one can spoil by building up too much. It should be a wonderful surprise amidst a much bigger, more explosive show, not the climax of a lesser work. "Balance Goddess" Lili Chao comes out onstage where there's a pile of wooden sticks of various sizes, thin on one end and stumping out on the other. They look like uneven bamboo poles or fronds stripped of leaves or something. She picks up a very small one with her foot, then picks up another and carefully balances the first on top of the second. Then her foot raises up a slightly larger one and that too is threaded through the first two in a way that balances them all. Then comes another, even larger one and that too is placed on the other side; it's like watching a skeleton in a museum being assembled before your eyes -- perhaps of a wing? Then comes another and another, each one picked up by her foot and then threaded through the delicate array of sticks jutting out this way and that until she's balancing a giant, beautiful strange structure on her hand.

Chao performs this with dramatic style, breathing in every once in a while to center herself and surely also just to add to the drama. The audience is immediately and completely quiet, first wondering what the heck is going on and then willing her to succeed by their focused attention. Finally she's created an impressively large sculpture out of these delicately balanced sticks and then places it all on her head while it slowly turns a bit in the air and the audience applauds. But there's one more stick, the largest of all and she picks it up with her foot, balances it on the ground and then places the entire structure on that with effortless grace. It simply sits there, but somehow the effect is lovely. As a final flourish, she pulls out one stick and the entire structure cascades to the ground...but because of the graduated sizes of each stick and how they were balanced, it cascades in a beautiful pattern that is deeply satisfying. This act is simple, elegant, and feels remarkably original. It is exceptionally hard to create an act or stunt or illusion (if you're a magician) that is genuinely fresh and Chao may well be doing this one for the rest of her life.

That's it, really, though there's more clowning and more subpar show to come. Kurkin looks great and does some athletic work on the Chinese pole, but like so many acts before it feels inelegant and unimaginative. He climbs to the top of the pole and then slides down to the ground in a rush, using only his hands or legs or waist or whatever to stop his fall at the last moment. The first time he does it, it's effective. But that's all he does and he does it four or five more times. Kee does some banal juggling and you hope yet again it's building to a big finale. People troop out with bamboo poles, assistants appear with what seem to be an array of juggling sticks on fire, ushers arrive at every aisle and crouch down for security...and then one tiny ball is set on fire and juggled amidst the rest for a few moments and it's over and everyone goes away.

A little more aerial work and then the big finale with everyone trooping out for bows and Amaluna fades away. Half moon? Quarter moon? Take your pick of imagery to reflect a show that doesn't begin to do justice to the standards of Cirque Du Soleil.