

Cirque du Soleil's silly, spectacular *Totem*

By Ian Blazina
The Asian Reporter

The title of Cirque du Soleil's extravagant carnival show, *Totem*, carries an air of the mythic. From an Algonquian word for "group" or "family," a totem is a family symbol that reminds of ancestors and creation stories.

From this starting place, the show aims to portray "the evolution of mankind," or something. Through a series of mismatched scenes that vaguely and haphazardly appropriate from cultures all over the world (a Native American character dancing with hula hoops, frat boy characters incongruously floor rocking to a Bollywood beat, a sleazy Italian in a tiny swimsuit), *Totem's* theme is a fragile vehicle connecting the individual acts of stunning physicality and technical skill. What the show, which runs through May 4, lacks in thematic coherence, it makes up in imaginative set and costume design and pure acrobatic spectacle.

After the Cirque clowns finish interacting with the crowd, *Totem* opens with a parallel bar act in which performers resembling amphibians launch from a trampoline set in the stage and interact with a structure in the shape of a turtle shell, spinning on the bars in frighteningly tight quarters. A character garbed like a humanoid disco ball (the Crystal Man) descends from the ceiling among the froglike gymnasts, working them into an acrobatic frenzy. Among the frog characters are four outstanding gymnasts, Umihiko Miya, Caoliang Wang (who also plays the Crystal Man in rotation), Riki Fujimaki, and Jonathan Buese.

Miya is a Tokyo-born gymnast who trained at the famous Tsukahara Gymnastics Center, named after five-time Olympic gold medallist Mitsuo Tsukahara. He taught gymnastics in Panama as part of a program run by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, which promotes economic and social development throughout the world, and also taught gymnastics in San Francisco before joining Cirque du



Soleil in 2010. Since leaving Japan, Miya has become fluent in Spanish and English, a feat he attributes in part to the universal appeal of gymnastics.

"We were communicating with sounds and movements," Miya said about his work as a cross-cultural gymnastics instructor. "The body language of gymnastics is international. My students taught me the language which helped me a lot."

Wang started gymnastics training at age five with his twin brother, and joined a gymnastics school at age eight with the hope of becoming an Olympic gymnast. After competing at the national level in China for 10 years, he taught gymnastics in China and Kuwait before joining Cirque du Soleil in 2009. While he has an opportunity to return to China for a few weeks each year, Wang says he also enjoys travelling with his friends from the show.

"Sometimes I prefer to travel around the world and go see where my *Totem* friends come from and spend time with their



STUNNING SPECTACLE. Cirque du Soleil's *Totem* show is in Portland through May 4. The production features unicyclists with bowls (left photo), parallel bars (right photo), manipulation, Russian bars, foot juggling, and more performed by artists from China, Japan, the U.S. and elsewhere. (AR Photos/Jan Landis)

friends and family," remarked Wang. "It is a great way for me to learn about other cultures."

In addition to the strong performances on the parallel bars, *Totem* also features a mind-boggling act in which five Chinese unicyclists descend a ramp and synchronously pedal their seven-foot-tall cycles around the stage while juggling metal bowls, tossing the bowls with their feet and catching them on their heads without using their hands. Seeing this maneuver once is awe inspiring; the entire act, involving perhaps 50 throws, often at moving targets, is hard to believe.

The performers — Jie Zhang, Jie Yang, Xue Wang, XiangJie Bai, and Rina Su — trained since childhood at the Inner Mongolia Acrobatic Troupe of China. They

joined the *Totem* show in February 2013. With such gifted athletes performing stunning displays of physical prowess and the inventive set design that doubles as setting and interactive equipment, the peculiar way in which the supposed lofty theme of *Totem* clashes with its low-brow humor and culture-vulture aesthetic is easily overlooked. It is a circus after all, and the spectacle is engrossing.

Totem premiered in Canada and toured in Europe before arriving in the United States. The show runs through May 4 at the Grand Chapiteau in the lower parking lot of the Portland Expo Center, located at 2060 N. Marine Drive in Portland. For more information, including showtimes, or to buy tickets, call 1-800-450-1480 or visit <www.cirquedusoleil.com>.

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TriMet's proposed 2014/2015 budget calls for more frequent service, better schedule reliability and less overcrowding. Here are some highlights:

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- **Better schedule reliability:** Schedules will change on Lines 20, 71 and 72 to improve reliability.
- **Less crowding:** We're adding buses to Lines 4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 20, 33, 44, 76, 94 and 99 to relieve overcrowding.
- **More new buses:** 64 new buses will join the fleet this year, for a total of 249 buses replaced since 2012.
- **No fare increase:** Once again this year, riders will not see a fare increase.

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The Public Forum will begin at 9:30 a.m. and will be a maximum of 45 minutes. If you wish to speak, please sign up by 9:30 a.m.

Wednesday, May 28, 2014 • 9 a.m.

Portland Building
Auditorium
1120 SW 5th Avenue
Portland

The Public Forum will begin at 9 a.m. and will be a maximum of 45 minutes. If you wish to speak, please sign up by 9 a.m.

The regular board meeting will begin immediately following the conclusion of the Public Forum.

You can also comment by emailing comments@trimet.org or by calling 503-238-7433 or TTY 7-1-1.

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