

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Cirque Shanghai shows big improvements

CIRCUS | Short acts with fleet, strong, likable performers

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BY HEDY WEISS Theater Critic

Cirque Shanghai has returned to Navy Pier for its second summer-long run with a new show, "Bai Xi" ("100 Stunning Acts"). Not only have its creators (including director Andrew Park, head of Chicago's Quest Theatre Ensemble) clearly learned from last year's mistakes by devising a 95-minute show now blissfully free of a cheesy narrator, they've also assembled a troupe of young, immensely likable performers. They move fleetly through a program of 20 short acts -- keeping the audience interested while never overtaxing performers who are on a grueling 10-show-per-week schedule.

In most cases, the virtuosity is impressive. A few of the performers still seem to be finding their footing, yet the occasional misfire makes a second attempt (and success beyond all expectations) just the more winning. The evening flows well, thanks to thematic backdrops (the Forbidden City for shows of strength, a mountain view for a towering chair-stacking routine), an effective use of shadows and enough pop music to suggest a sense of humor. Brief interludes of traditional live music, a dragon parade and a remarkable rapid-fire mask-changing trick add to the fun.

'CIRQUE SHANGHAI'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Sept. 3

Where: Skyline Stage on Navy Pier, 600 E. Grand

Tickets: \$14.50-\$29.50

Phone: (312) 902-1500

Both a pyramid of petite but steely contortionists, and the counterweight balances of the strongmen are eye-popping, as is an act in which they create a Hindu-like multiplicity of arms and legs. The tension builds in a slack-wire routine -- with an adult on a unicycle and a child who carries off a slew of stunts while perched atop the adult. The girl on a unicycle engages in some remarkable eye-foot coordination as she flips small tin bowls onto her head while peddling. And the bicycle pyramid (a male driver with about 10 girls hopping on) proves to be a guaranteed favorite.

The plate-spinners turn the stage into a gently vibrating lily-pad garden. And there is no fear of centrifugal force in the woman performing the Spanish web act. Also on the bill are trapeze artists, a trio of Silk Girls who "wrap and unroll" and a Tarzan (whose act needs more definition).

Especially strong is the Roman Wheel routine, with acrobats curling into double-rimmed contraptions and getting picked up and rolled over along the way. For the colorful finale, there is even some synchronized bungee-jumping.