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Cabaret in New York

A circus for grown-ups

Jul 19th 2007

From *The Economist* print edition

Spiegelworld is back on the East River

La Vie

PIER 17 in downtown Manhattan is not the most likely destination for theatre-goers. But here on the East River, among the wailing seagulls, frying fish and tourists, is an enchanting offer of entertainment. Spiegelworld is back in town for its second summer, with two spicy cabaret shows of dance, music, acrobatics and burlesque. Called "Absinthe" and "La Vie", the shows are staged in the anachronistic opulence of a *spiegeltent* (Flemish for "tent of mirrors").



Sex in the air

quality."

This one, which dates from the 1920s and has a painted art-nouveau façade, lends continental glamour to the pier. It holds about 350 people on wooden chairs and banquettes around a modest, circular stage. And it is this intimacy, this proximity to the performers, that gives these shows their special feel. Erotic contortionists, balletic hand-balancers and bawdy jugglers emanate a sweaty, tangible humanity. Many of them, Mr Gantner explains, have left larger circus troupes, such as Cirque du Soleil, in order to make eye-contact with their audience. The simplicity of the staging gives their performances a gritty authenticity.

Once in a while, a family on a children's outing is fooled by Spiegelworld's festive red-and-blue tent spires. Make no mistake: the shows are for adults. "La Vie", created by Les 7 Doigts de la Main, a Montreal-based troupe, laces an array of artfully sexy circus acts with the premise that everyone is dead and in purgatory, travelling on "a flight to hell that never quite gets there". Wearing what looks like a straitjacket, a contortionist moves in a highly unsettling way to a recording of "Crazy", crooned by Patsy Cline. The show closes with a steamy *pas de deux* between the devilish master of ceremonies and the evening's lip-curling seductress.



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"Absinthe" is a more explicit grab-bag of stripping, cross-dressing and intrigue, without a unifying theme. The show's strongest moments come from the acrobats, all of whom carry a powerful sexual charge. Two women sway with suggestive grace on the trapeze. An aerialist in black trousers, his sculpted chest glistening, pulls and twists himself up two hanging straps to the lusty music of "Jealous Guy", sung by a transvestite diva.

Sexy but not tawdry. Despite colourful language and a brief moment of unnecessary male nudity in "La Vie", the setting is too elegant and the talent too astonishing for that. It's a bit of risqué fun that has been warmly received by New Yorkers, many of whom have grown tired of the wholesome, tourist-friendly fare of Broadway. Last summer "Absinthe" ran for two months to sell-out crowds; this year's two-show programme is for three months until the end of September.

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