

# Chicago Tribune

## Cirque bugs out extravagantly with 'Ovo'

Famed troupe returns with insect-themed show that will have 'em climbing the walls

By Chris Jones

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Insects are such a good match for the [Cirque du Soleil](#), you have to wonder why those scurrying around that famous Montreal hive had not thought of them before.

In years of reviewing Cirque shows, from "Nouvelle Experience" on, this is the first time that Cirque's contortionists have made dramatic sense. In every other show, you admire the twists and turns, spend a few seconds pondering your own ever-

growing inability to do even a fraction of the same, and then wonder not so much *where* those arms and legs might be going next as *why* they would be going there.

Yet in Deborah Colker's distinctive, fresh and curious "Ovo," which hatched a summer Chicago run Wednesday night, you actually get to see these performers create a slew of spiders, to name but one of the bugs under the creative microscope. Or so it seems. Some of the appendages display the kind of mutative powers that make the term "leg" redundant.

"Ovo" is my favorite Cirque show in a couple of years. "Viva Elvis," the newest Las Vegas show, is trapped in the celebration of authorized Elvis, hindering creativity. The less said about the disastrous "Banana Shpeel" the better. In Vegas, Cirque now tends to split the demographic, offering different kinds of shows for different kinds of people (up next: [Michael Jackson](#)). Its track record in proscenium theaters remains mixed. And who wants to see Cirque in some sterile suburban arena?

But the first-run tent shows — "Ovo" is the latest in a long and very distinguished line that have been coming to Chicago for two decades — retain a certain purity of vision and connection to the company's outdoor roots. Gifted artists such as Colker, a major figure in contemporary Brazilian dance, are generally left alone to do their thing. The experience for an audience is intimate, yet full of spectacle. And for Cirque, the canvas is secured by 25 years of creativity.

If you're a Cirque veteran, you'll want to know where "Ovo" falls. It's certainly not Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," but "Ovo" is heavier than most on story. It's particularly strong on the creation of a joyous community within the house troupe and it uses more of the language of dance-theater than most Cirque shows (although not all the performers are dancers). There is a charming, handmade quality not as apparent in harder edged pieces like "Varekai" or "Delirium" and, most refreshing of all, a complete absence of visible digital technology. Instead of screens, we get Gringo Cardia's huge flowers, which open beautifully to tempt the hungry. The finale — a gathering of the insects akin to how [Julie Taymor](#), back when she was happy, gathered the beasts of the prairie — is a delight.

"Ovo" is more family-friendly than most Cirque shows (it rivals "Mystere" in that regard). Kids around me were engrossed. Even young kids — generally a *mais non* at costly Cirque shows — will have something to watch. The clowning ladybug (Michelle Matlock) talks like one of the Teletubbies and all the color and cocoons combine to create the psychedelic quality one associates with kiddie networks like [Sprout](#). Conversely, if you look to Cirque for sensual foreplay on a date night — a la that famous beautiful flying man of years back — all of these ants, spiders and dragonflies might not help with that, the zesty Samba-influenced score notwithstanding.

If Colker was influenced by any previous show, it was "Ka" (and, in my book, any Cirque director most influenced by [Robert Lepage](#)'s Vegas masterpiece is on the right track). In the second act of "Ovo," far more exciting than the more static first, the knockout centerpiece is the sheer side of a rock, viewed, "Ka"-like, as if from above. On this trampo-wall, a bunch of zippy bugs do their thing, with a sexy spider acting as a ringer. It's quite the extravaganza and it makes the last 20 minutes of "Ovo" by far the best.

There are a few compromises with this conceit. Perhaps more than any past show, the skills of human daring are submerged in character. As it has branched out to new directors and expanded its aesthetic, Cirque has moved further from that sense of wonder, bemusement, spectatorship and soaring, raw, human achievement that captured so many hearts years ago. It is hard to ripple your muscles and head for the heavens when you're playing a caterpillar. I hope next time, Cirque goes back to that. Mind you, it's a really cool caterpillar in a really cool show. And there are some neat fleas — their own circus, really. A fine pair of strapped butterflies (Svitlana Kashevarova and Dmytro Orel). And a full-on trapeze act, the Scarabs Volant, that manages to fly despite barely enough room for a single, let alone a triple.

The band, by the way, is all cockroaches. I wonder if Cirque is in negotiations with its musicians.