

Award for Outstanding Achievement Kà Floating Stages

kà-dventure



by Liucija Ambrosini

You are immersed. You hear hisses and gasps of air, flashes of fire, an ancient breathing and sighs like forgotten wind. The metallic groaning of some long-forgotten, industrial monolith occasionally intensifies and then subsides. The look of the huge theater perhaps owes inspiration as much to massive, age-old Japanese temples as to Jules Verne, or "Dune." Giant pillars, lit by long cylinders of light, seem fashioned of iron and the wood of primeval forests. Numerous balconies, like so many ships' decks, frame the stage opening. But where the stage should be, there is nothing... a void.

A narrow boardwalk curves gently along the entire front and separates the audience from the vast darkness and the endless pit. Fire and smoke burst occasionally from the abyss. The audience sits at the brink of this volcano and waits to see what will fill the empty space.

Then, it happens. An apparition floats up out of the cavernous mist. A platform appears: a majestic, Imperial barge. It draws near. It floats and turns on the invisible sea carrying rowers and royalty alike to their destiny, to the epic journey. This ballet of movement by man and machine alike begins.

The show's title refers to the ancient Egyptian term "kà," signifying a spiritual double that journeys alongside every human being in this life and into the next. Created and directed by Robert Lepage, the story is about the coming

of age of young Imperial twins, a girl and boy torn apart by war. Through their perilous journeys they encounter love, danger, heroism and the duality of fire which can illuminate or destroy, separate or unite.

The barge docks in what appears to be an ancient Asian kingdom, and a celebration begins. But the festivities are destroyed by a fiery attack and a relentless pursuit of the twins is on. Danger waits at every turn and death-defying exploits abound as the chase runs through craggy mountains, forests and the enemy's evil empire.

Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberte and Guy Caron, director of creation for "Kà," began research in 2002 to achieve this theatrical

breakthrough. They assembled a world-class team including Lepage, set designer Mark Fisher and composer Rene Dupere.

The story is told using spectacular martial arts, acrobatics, exotic puppetry, ballet, Asian-inspired costumes and make-up, extraordinary sound, multimedia and pyrotechnics. It takes place in real time, with film-like flow of scene and set transitions done in full view of the audience. Within three or four minutes one scene is ready to go on while a different scene shifts off. A monumental effort was required. So was a new concept of theatrical space.

So... they eliminated the stage. It became a pit that could be filled or emptied at will



Photos: Thomas Musciconio



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through the use of two giant platforms, the Sand Cliff Deck and the Tatami Deck, that enter and exit and participate much as performers in their own right. With no permanent floor, it became a suspended world with performers mostly flying in or riding in on the stages or lifts. It called for a completely new way of staging.

The use of the two decks allows such fluid, seamless shift of scene and action with such speed and flexibility that all perceived barriers gravity might impose seem not to exist. An attack scene changes to shipboard, then to the ship sinking and then to an undersea view as a drowning woman is pulled to safety. The platform reappears as a beach concealing fabulous creatures in its deep sand. It rises and turns on its side, showering sand into the pit like a giant waterfall.

In one scene of desperate fighting, the Sand Cliff Deck rotates up to 12 degrees per second and tilts through 50 degrees, as pursuers and prey fall off and plunge as far as 60 feet into the depths below. The deck becomes a forbidding vertical ice cliff where safety is a tiny tribal abode high atop the mountain. Snow gives way to a firelit hut, the gentle respite is shattered by attackers whereupon the survivors and their hut transform into a giant flying machine. As the mountain falls away, the flying machine circles and slowly descends into the pit...

There seem to be no limitations in this parallel universe. If it's possible for massive machinery to be ephemeral, this is it.

The components are used most eloquently in the final battle scene. Combatants standing on the narrow boardwalk suddenly fly up into and land on the vertical battlefield. Just as suddenly, we are presented an aerial view in which every move and step the embattled warriors take forms a water-like ripple on the battlefield surface. As the performers strive at a perpendicular angle to the deck in this extreme ballet, their movements are captured by infra-red camera, facilitating their interaction with computer generated images that appear on projection tiles of the deck.

The immense stage area is some 15 stories from the highest ceiling grid to the lowest floor level. From the stage level of the boardwalk to the high grid is 98 feet and the pit drops 51 feet below. The opening width and depth of the performance area are each 120 feet. Two major decks, plus five smaller lifts and platforms, form the performance space.

The incredibly complicated maneuvers are mostly performed with the formidable Sand Cliff Deck. Weighing 80,000 pounds, it measures 25' by 50' and is six feet deep. It is composed of seven main steel structure pieces, with acrobat railings on all four sides and other support systems as well as circular elevators to bring performers in and out. It took six flatbed trucks to deliver.

A vertical gantry crane supports and controls it like a giant mechanical arm. This is attached to four 75-foot long hydraulic cylinders that run along two support columns allowing the deck to rotate and stand vertically. In a single action, the gantry crane can lift the Sand Cliff Deck up and down 72 feet, rotate it 360 degrees and tilt it from flat to 110 degrees. The fastest move in the show is two feet per second. The deck and crane have a combined weight of approximately 280,000 lbs. and are powered by five 250 hp pumps and a 4,000-gallon oil reservoir.

The deck is fitted with show and work lights, drive units for the elevators, high voltage distribution panels and a lighting dimmer storage area, as well as video projection tiles. When the deck is vertical, performers can climb the 82 rod actuators that pop up out of its surface. It stores sand (actually, cork granules) for the beach scene.

The Tatami Deck, located upstage of the Sand Cliff Deck, is a cantilevered 30' x 30' foot platform. It slides in and out like a drawer to provide a horizontal stage and carry massive set pieces such as the gigantic Wheel of Death. It can glide downstage 50 feet out over the void where it seems to float effortlessly. It weighs 75,000 lbs, runs on two electric motors and uses hydraulic brakes.

The two decks can appear alone or together or simply disappear from view. They can move in front of, behind, above or below each other: Their interaction and their smoothness and speed of mobility are breathtaking.

In his book, "The Empty Space," legendary theatrical director Peter Brook urged actors and directors to look into the empty space of the stage and envision filling it with form and movement. But to dare to look at a stage and envision a void, and then fill it with such beauty and inspired use of technology, is an astounding achievement. This is staging with no boundaries.



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