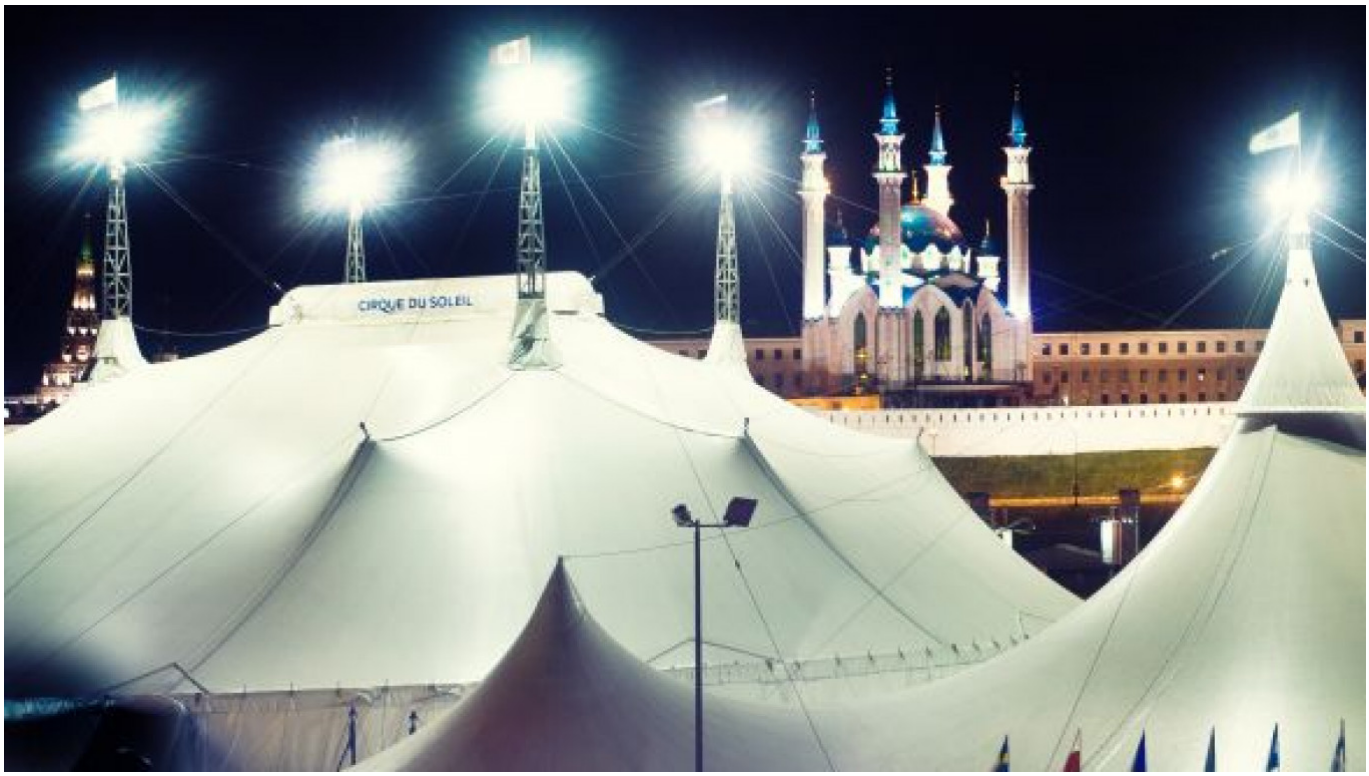
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Acrobats Catapult Kazan's Global Image

By Lena Smirnova

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The traditional big top "Corteo" show spent five weeks in Kazan in 2010 and drew more than 110,000 viewers.

When it comes to picking Russia's third "capital," Kazan is not the obvious political or business choice, but thanks to a crew of leotard-clad acrobats dancing to American pop classics, this city on the banks of the Volga River is quickly gaining recognition in the country as well as worldwide.

Kazan's officials are trying to boost the city's global image ahead of its hosting the 27th Summer Universiade, an international youth sporting competition, in July 2013.

One of the key successes has been getting the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil to make a pit stop in the city last week following its St. Petersburg tour dates for "Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour" and ahead of the six Moscow shows, which start Tuesday.

Kazan is the only Russian city aside from the political and cultural Russian capitals to have hosted the acrobatic tribute to the King of Pop and will welcome Cirque du Soleil again May 29

with its “Alegria” spectacle, set to launch the cultural program of the Universiade.

“People from more than 175 countries will come to our city,” Mayor Ilsur Metshin told The Moscow Times. “The world, through Kazan and the Universiade, will see Russia.”

Metshin first saw a Cirque du Soleil performance when he was vacationing in Lisbon. Upon his return to Kazan, he immediately approached the municipal authorities to invite the Canadian company to the city.

“Cirque du Soleil is now a world treasure. It’s the eighth wonder of the world in culture,” Metshin said. “There was a great wish to acquaint the locals with this show.”

The circus made its first journey to Kazan in 2010 with the traditional big-top show “Corteo.” Local officials had provided it with a good central platform, marketing support and workers to help set up the venue. The show was a big success with audiences, which came from across Tatarstan as well as from neighboring cities Nizhny Novgorod, Samara and Saratov.

The administration’s solid support for the production made it almost inevitable that Cirque du Soleil would come back to the city, said Natalia Romanova, general director of Cirque du Soleil in Russia.

The circus returned the following year with “Saltimbanco” and last week wrapped up its Michael Jackson shows at Tatneft Arena.

“Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour” is a combination of acrobatics and dances set to the late singer’s chart-topping songs. The sets are inspired by Jackson’s infamous Neverland Ranch in California.

Keeping up with the show’s authenticity in music and dance, the producers had commissioned artists who worked with Michael Jackson to stage the show. The show’s writer and director, Jaime King, previously collaborated with Jackson and other artists, while musical director Greg Phillinganes directed the singer’s “Bad” and “Dangerous” tours.

Romanova said the company would have liked to perform the show in other Russian cities that have a million residents or more, but only Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan had the facilities to accommodate the circus, which requires high and strong ceilings to support acrobats and enough seats to make the shows profitable.

In St. Petersburg, the show was held at the Ice Palace, and in Moscow it will be at Olimpiisky stadium. Kazan’s Tatneft Arena was built in 2005 and is usually used for hockey matches.

Like Cirque du Soleil’s previous shows, the Michael Jackson tribute drew fans from hundreds of kilometers around Kazan to see the show.

Several tourist companies were helping to organize tours to the shows. Romanova estimated that about 30 percent of the tickets for Kazan’s three shows were sold through these channels.

Even before the shows were over, the organizers had begun to talk about the return of Cirque du Soleil to Kazan with its more lyrical “Alegria.”

“Audiences don’t hide their emotions during the show. There is always an ovation for hard numbers,” Romanova said of the show’s popularity. “The Russian audience stands up to bid farewell to the artists. The wave starts in the pit and rolls up to the balconies.”

"Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour" will be in Moscow from Tuesday to Sunday. The first four shows start at 8 p.m., and the Sunday show starts at 6 p.m. at Olimpiisky, located at 16 Olimpiisky Prospekt. (495) 786-3305. www.olimpik.ru. Running time: 2 hours with a break.

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