

Circus Unveils World of Madness and Sport

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Acrobat Anna Stankus twirls up to 10 hoops during her routine for Kooza. **Katja Byushgens**

Cirque du Soleil's "Kooza" is as close you can get to falling through a rabbit hole into a Lewis Carroll-like crazy world: either that or sitting in the front row of a national athletics championship.

The show serves up an irresistibly mad concoction of music, comedy and acrobatics. But while everything in Kooza's make-believe kingdom, which is ruled by a jester instead of a king, seems to be upside down, there is also discipline and almost mathematical precision throughout.

Kooza is a celebration of athleticism as much as it is entertainment, with 65 percent of the show's participants coming from the world of professional sports.

"Each time you walk out on stage, and it is not exactly like a world championship, but you

have to give it all you have," said Anna Stankus, a Ukrainian who does a gymnastics hoops number in the second half of the show.

Stankus practiced artistic gymnastics in Ukraine and competed in several international tournaments. She ended her professional career early to study sports judging in university, but talent scouts saw her in a competition and offered to join their show.

At the age of 21, when most gymnasts are preparing to leave the professional sports world, Stankus learned the moves for her signature circus act — twirling up to 10 hoops while doing handstands and other complex gymnastics poses.

She also learned to smile.

"When I started working, it was a nightmare," Stankus said. "My coaches always told me, 'You stand there with a frozen face. The face has to be relaxed. You have to play and smile and not stand on stage like an athlete.'" It took me a long time to learn."

Smiles are also essential for Cirque du Soleil acts. The Canadian company has a casting department that travels around the world scouting for talent at the Olympics, World Championships and national competitions. But even those with the best athletic skills are not guaranteed a ticket into the circus.

"We want you to be the best acrobat in the world, but we also want you to be good-looking," the circus' spokesman, Adrian Gonzalez-Ibbitson said. "We want you to be able to work within a group. It is not about you anymore. It is about the show. And we want you to show emotions."

Stankus was recruited into Cirque du Soleil's Kooza less than a year ago and maintains a strict training regime, not unlike that of an athlete in the prime of her competition days.

Cirque du Soleil treats its artists as if they were, in fact, training for the Olympics. There are coaches, doctors, masseuses, cooks and pilates teachers on site. The artists have as many as 10 performances per week with each act recorded on tape for later analysis.

Costumes are designed to be wacky enough to believe that their wearers would voluntarily enter the Wheel of Death, but also durable and comfortable enough for them to come out unscathed. Natural fabrics are used whenever possible.

"It is a bit of a balance between staying true to the designer's vision and also making sure that the artist feels almost naked," said Marcel Bofil, head of Kooza's wardrobe department. "If the artists feel kind of naked, then they only have to think about the crazy stuff that they have to do in the show."

The busy training and performance schedule is physically draining, Stankus said. This year alone, Kooza has traveled to four countries, stopping for two months in Moscow after also visiting England, Spain and Belgium.

Some artists, particularly those with families back home, are not able to keep up with the lifestyle of sleeping in hotel rooms, spending a large chunk of the day on the training mat and even eating out in a circus tent. Others choose to have their wives and children travel with

them.

Stankus said she did not regret being on tour for so long, even though this meant she was away from her relatives and friends. She added, however, that she would be interested in working in a stationary show in the future, which would give more opportunities to settle down and start a family.

But for now, fellow circus performers, handpicked from 25 different countries, are her one sports team and family.

"It is the life of unordinary people," Stankus said. "Many people, when they leave the circus, say that it is a special, different world. It is not like ordinary life."

"Kooza" will be at Luzhniki Stadium until Nov. 4. For performance times and tickets, see the Cirque de Soleil website at cirquedusoleil.com/en/shows/kooza/tickets/moscow.

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