

Gymnasts, dancers and the ghost of Jacko



They've got a giant glove and his pet chimp but of course the star of Cirque du Soleil's new show is absent, says Tim Teeman

The shouts are plaintive: "We love you, Michael!" Mass whooping and hollering ensues. The thing is, "Michael" isn't in the cavernous thunderdome of Las Vegas's Mandalay Bay, where Cirque du Soleil, the sparkly and death-defying circus troupe, are holding the US premiere of *Michael Jackson The Immortal World Tour*, featuring Jackson's songs, sometimes in full, sometimes mixed together, playing over a group of dancers and acrobats throwing themselves off platforms or dancing in the dark, illuminated by lightbulbs sewn on to their leotards.

The show, which will tour the world over the next three years and reaches London this October, features no mention of child sex scandals or additions. This is "a celebration of Michael's life", everyone with the show insists, and if you are not one of the Jackson faithful you may observe the spectacle askance, particularly when Bubbles the chimp appears, or when an

animatronic "Michael" pilots a balloon with a red love heart glittering in the darkness. *Blame it on the Boogie* comes with two bejewelled model elephants.

Camp and deranged as it may be, here and there are fleeting references to the darker faultlines of Jackson's biography: the show begins with the song *Childhood* ("Have you seen my childhood?") Jackson's disembodied voice sings), the gates of *Neverland* on stage looming like prison gates.

A parade of hysterical tabloid headlines plays over Jackson desperately pleading for his privacy; the media are the criminals in the show, rather than Jackson. But these reflective moments are few, and soon we're back to all-singing, all-dancing renditions of the likes of *ABC* and the gloopy environmentalism of *Earth Song*. It's so portentously performed with multiple globes flying through the air that you yearn for a Jarvis Cocker-style intervention.

The show is made more problematic because, as Chantal Tremblay, the creative director, says: "You don't have the star on that stage. You go and see



MICHAEL JACKSON IMMORTAL WORLD TOUR BY CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

“An animatronic Michael pilots a balloon with a red love heart

Madonna and there may be 15, 20 dancers, but bam, you have that person, singing, the reason you are there. But we don't have Michael . . .”

Some moments make for stunning stagecraft — *Thriller* features a fun, jittery mash-up of video projections, a giant silver glove has its own dancing

solo — but repeatedly Jackson's voice, the references to his clothes and life and the presence of a figure attired in a white tracksuit covered in Swarovski crystals who seems like him, serve to underscore Tremblay's point: Jackson isn't there, and it's bizarre seeing his ghost used so slickly to make money and weirder still to hear his devoted fans calling his name in the darkness.

Such misgivings are not held by Jackson's intimates. Kevin Antunes, the show's musical designer, says that Berry Gordy, the Motown Records boss who signed the Jackson 5 in 1968, told him:

"The way this show has been put together, it's as if the people truly knew Michael and truly knew his music."

Cirque du Soleil's show features stunning stagecraft — and few references to the darker faultlines in Michael Jackson's life

The Jackson family themselves are also squarely behind the show, seeing it en masse in Las Vegas (including their matriarch, Katherine). The day after the premiere, I meet Jackson's brothers, Jackie and Tito. Jackie tells me they found it "exciting, uplifting, full of energy — it captured every aspect of my brother's life". The Jackson 5 tribute in the show "brought back the days when we were all young kids living our dream," says Tito. "Hearing him sing *Gone Too Soon* was emotional for me, because he is too. I absolutely miss him,

400 years, nothing is going to bring Michael Jackson back. I don't feel hatred towards anyone."

Jamie King, the show's writer and director (and director of stage shows for stars such as Rihanna, Madonna and Britney Spears), was one of Jackson's four principal dancers for his 1992 *Dangerous* tour. "I saw Michael leave his heart on the floor for his fans every night. I also saw his humanity, his humour, how passionate he was about the state of the world. This show is in no way reflective of his hard times or public views or the persecution of him. That's not entertainment for me. This show had to be inspiring and loving."

Tremblay says that when production members visited Neverland to research Jackson's life she saw the "tiny studio" in which he practised his dance moves. "You could see where he was always spinning, the floor was scratched and a spotlight was focused on it."

Jackson's children saw the show at its world premiere in Montreal, she adds, where his son Prince, 14, played with his father's animatronic puppet. Everyone involved with the production is adamant the singer would have "loved the show" in all its glittery bombast . . . well, almost. Travis Payne laughs. "Michael would have said, 'The music needs to be louder, I can't feel it in my chest.'"

The brothers, Jackie says, would like to see "as many productions as possible". The brothers themselves will be going on a world tour "performing his songs and our songs", says Tito. As for Dr Conrad Murray, sentenced to four years' jail for Jackson's involuntary manslaughter, Tito says: "Whether they gave Dr Murray four years or

A Greek tragedy — but with much better jokes

Comedy troupe Spymonkey are 'in crisis'. Dominic Maxwell finds them making a drama out of it

Oedipus Rex is a smashing story and all that, but come on, Sophocles, where are the belly laughs? In a rehearsal room in Northampton, the comedy theatre quartet Spymonkey are trying to rectify that shortfall. Their director, Emma Rice, sits watching as they work on a scene in which the young Oedipus leaves home, trying to thwart the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. It's laugh-out-loud funny. It is also, as Oedipus and his royal mum and dad bawl their eyes out while Barber's *Adagio for Strings* plays in the background, oddly affecting. "High tragedy sits close to high comedy," says Rice. "So I hope we're not destroying the tragedy."

Fingers crossed that it all works out, because this is a crisis show for Spymonkey. Or that's what they suggest anyway, playing themselves — the Brits Toby Park and Petra Massey, the Spaniard Aitor Basauri and the German Stephan Kreiss — in their personal prologue to *Oedipussy*. Well into their forties, still plying gleefully silly, gruellingly physical comedy, they tell us of their ailments and the families they have to left to go on tour. And their last big show, *Moby Dick*, earned a scathing review (from *The Scotsman*) that accused them of being "middle-aged actors making a two-hour professional show out of a one-line joke . . . driven by that great middlebrow need to make theatre safe". Ouch.

Their injuries are real. Their sense of hurt at the review is overstated, suggests Park. He may not be speaking for the entire group here. "What we do is never 'safe'," insists Basauri. "If you try to make people laugh you are never safe, never ever. There is a lack of recognition of us as theatre performers because we are funny. Theatre can't be funny unless it's Noël Coward, unless it works very nicely on paper. But we don't write, we muck around. People underestimate how wonderful it is to have fun, to have joy."

Certainly the Spymonkey shows that I've seen have been joyful affairs, *Moby Dick* included. If there's a funnier theatre company out there, I can't think of it. But by their own admission their shows can be messy. They need something strong, and someone strong, to rebel against. Hence their delight that a fanciful call to Rice — the creator of shows such as *Brief Encounter*, *The Red Shoes* and *The Bacchae* for the theatre company Kneehigh — paid off.

"Emma likes to push for the story," says Massey, "and we like to kill the story!"

Rice, it turns out,

took the job because she's a fan. "I think they're the greatest clowns working in Europe," she says, not in their presence, during a break. At their first meeting, she decided that Spymonkey needed a story so sturdy they could play off it for a whole evening. She suggested *Oedipus*, then blurted out the title *Oedipussy*. She heard them talking about their injuries, about *that* review, and urged them to put Spymonkey's own midlife crisis in the show too.

As they rehearse today, they scuff up and add jokes to Carl Grose's script. They each play various roles, apart from the gloriously doomy, silver-haired Kreiss as Oedipus. But always you can see their persona — their "clown" as they refer to it — in what they do: Massey's physicality, Basauri's sly shamelessness, Park's not-as-sensible-as-he-thinks straight man.

Is what they do clowning, then? "Talking about the C-word is difficult," says Park, "because it has the stigma of red nose and big boots. We steer clear of using it because it has those connotations. But when we talk about ourselves it's absolutely our clown, our clown is doing this or is doing that."

Spymonkey formed in 1997, after Park, Massey and Basauri met while working in Zurich on a show for the theatre company Karls Kühne Gassenschau. The show failed — "a grand flop, we called it," Massey says — but they had such fun in their dressing room that they wanted to work together again. They teamed up with the director Cal McCrystal (who recently directed the physical comedy in *One Man, Two Guvnors*) and did their first show together, *Stiff*, in 1998. Then their original teammate, Paul Weilenmann from Switzerland, dropped out. So they advertised for "a funny German". ("Hundreds of people were queuing up!" insists Kreiss.)

This line-up has been together since 2000, doing shows of their own as well as a two-year stint in Las Vegas in the Cirque du Soleil show *Zumanity*. Now, though, they live across Europe. "Six or seven months a year I'm away," says Kreiss, who is based in Vienna, managing to sound both lighthearted and depressed. "I've got two kids. I would prefer to do what I do in Austria,

but the acceptance for this kind of theatre isn't there."

They would love to take their work to the West End. But this capering about is no joke. Last summer they worked with the comedy-theatre company Peepolykus for a joint demolition job on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* at the Latitude Festival. They hope to repeat it in late 2013. Such forward planning is necessary even with a bunch of clowns.

Rice admits there are challenges: "Is there conflict? There absolutely is. They can be so naughty! The clowning instinct is to destroy, and to enjoy the destruction. And every bit of my body is trying to build a way through."

Oedipussy, Theatre Royal, Northampton (01604 624811), from Fri to Feb 18, then touring to May 16; spymonkey.co.uk

Sophocles with belly laughs: Spymonkey present Oedipussy



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