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Children's fest: The reviews are in

Downtown tent city full of smiles during this year's children's festival; Gazette staff review early favourites

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A quick scamper through the 30th annual Northern Alberta International Children's Festival offers a non-stop flow of irresistible rhythms, flamboyant costumes and sparkling theatricality.

With Il Circo's cirque production *Viaggio*, the five-day festival that runs until Saturday, is now festooned with an added dash of glitz and glamour — an element that was missing in previous incarnations.

Watching the little ones laugh and run with delight through the carnival-like, tent city located on the banks of the Sturgeon River in downtown St. Albert, it's obvious the festival is an event that can transform lives — be it with music, theatre, puppetry, dance or mesmerizing storytelling.

This year the festival has a particularly strong line-up of mainstage shows that celebrate children's creativity and imagination in all its forms. Although adults create the shows, they speak with children's hearts and voices in the passionate belief that anything is possible. Just step out of your comfort zone and dare to risk.



APRIL BARTLETT/St. Albert Gazette

Viaggio's Il Circo all but steals the show at this year's Northern Alberta International Children's Festival. The cirque-style performance is a sure-fire crowd thriller.

[view all photos \(2\)](#)

Viaggio

Il Circo

Save-On Foods Stage (Arden Theatre)

All ages

Stars 4.5/5

Il Circo's *Viaggio* is one of the festival's hottest tickets and for a good reason. Make that a great reason. The performance blends medieval Italian commedia dell'arte posturing with modern acrobatic theatre à la Cirque de Soleil, all under the premise that we are witnessing a young girl being guided through the fair by a life-sized doll from a Jack-in-the-box.

The performers (hailing from Eastern Europe, Guatemala and the United States) have some serious talents. There are some amazingly strong acrobats who climb up and drop down the Chinese poles with enough grace to wow this crowd. One woman nimbly danced around with the aerial chiffon, spinning around and around so much that it not only made me awestruck but also induced nausea.

My favourites were the one guy who can stand up from the splits and the master of balance with the Mohawk hair. The guy in the German wheel made his act look so effortless that I thought that smaller versions should be installed in school playgrounds.

Then there's the one crowd-pleasing performer who balances on steel cylinders and then does contortions with hoops. At one point, he sets up five cylinders, some straight up and others on their sides, pointed in different directions. He puts that all on a rotating disc and stands on top of the whole mess with just a plank. It's mesmerizing.

If this show doesn't make your jaw drop, what will?

— Scott Hayes



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