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Paul Sanchez



Exit to Mystery Street

Descendants of the Dragon

Written by Su-Jit Lin

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To us far West Westerners, anything from that other hemisphere is exotic and excitingly unfamiliar. The Asian subcontinent and all of its culture and tradition is still almost as great a mystery to us now as it was a century ago. But it is this aura of alien-ness and this sense of the veiled unknown that lend shows like *JUNGUA: Descendants of the Dragon* the shrouded allure necessary to go from mild success to the traveling headlining tour it is.

The act's pedigree is an impressive one. Produced by two Cirque de Soleil alumni, former world-renowned acrobat Yan Yan Zhao and talented artistic director Mark "Eddy" McGuire, this show incorporates the drama, skill, and beauty that are the cornerstones of performing arts. Both knowledgeable experts in the field of Chinese acrobatics, their ability to channel the most impressive moves and routines into their show is commendable. But then again, so are the players.

There are two major types of performers in this show – martial arts experts, the Shaolin Disciples, and the Imperial Acrobats of China, skilled contortionists and incredible mavens of controlled movement. Both groups are the best of the best, and given the feats they accomplish every performance and the endurance needed to get through a single show, they simply have to be.

The Imperial Acrobats are comprised of four ladies, all professionally trained since childhood and shining stars of the Beijing Acrobatic Troup near the Forbidden City in China. These women dedicate their lives to learning the art of movement, incorporating classic and modern dance moves, hand-balancing, foot juggling, and shocking yet graceful and beautiful contortions into their act. You'll see elaborate costumes that much more accurately represent traditional Chinese dress than the modernized yet more commonly seen Mandarin *qipao* gowns. That is, of course, when they're not wearing sequined, second-skin bodysuits that further enhance the contortionist acts. But it's not like those performances need much enhancing, though. Balancing acts with real lit candelabras, juggling cloths and umbrellas with hands, feet, face, or a combination, and exquisite dances, including the 'Flowing Sleeves' and Thai-inspired 'Goddess With Eight Arms,' set to Chinese music with a contemporary Western twist, will have you gasping with wonder and amazement.

The Shaolin Disciples are equally trained, following a demanding and rigorous lifestyle of peak physical fitness and the ability to truly achieve mind over matter. Also recruited at a tender age, these Kung Fu masters come from the world-famous Shaolin Temple and Shaolin Kung Fu Institute in Dengfeng, China. This form of martial arts originated 1,500 years ago as a method of moving meditation for the monks, eventually developing into a form of self-defense with fluid moves and lightning strikes, both in hand-to-hand combat and in the use of classical weaponry. The Disciples also demonstrate *Qi Gong*, a controversial practice that teaches its students to regulate and specially target an individual's *qi*, or life force. Through intense mental focus and channeling of this abstract energy, the fighters cause their bodies to become impervious to spears, beds of nails or swords, and other normally puncturing objects. Their concentration is such that they are able to power through concrete slabs, wood, and metal, and have bricks hammered and broken atop their heads with no apparent resultant physical damage to themselves.

The beauty in their performance is in the sheer artistry involved. Kung Fu, a method of fighting that can easily kill, is transformed truly into martial arts. Intense and pulsing music, liquid movement, impressive choreography, dramatic lighting, traditional costume, and the show of grace in every small motion come together to make this deadly art a gorgeous dance rich with meaning. The same goes for the acts of the acrobats, as contortions are demonstrated with stylish flair, elegant finesse, and astonishing control. Their movements are delicate and lovely, but their sheer physical ability, apparent with the slow smoothness of their actions, is just incredible. The dances are perfectly synced and capture many of the classical elements of Chinese dance.

This stunning show is a solid bargain at just \$35 a ticket, available directly through Harrah's. Prepare to be blown away and to experience some of the best things Chinese entertainment has to offer with the show-stopping drama American production contributes. *JUNGUA: Descendants of the Dragon* is a winner from first astonished outcry to the very last pulse-pounding sharp intake of breath, and the ninety minutes fly on by as quickly as the Shaolin Disciples across a stage that can barely contain the excitement.

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