

Cirque du Soleil touring show, Kooza, sets up in Austin this month

Twenty-five feet in the air, four men in worn leather shoes perch atop two small platforms beneath a blue-and-yellow-striped tent. One by one, the men gracefully prance across thin wire connecting the platforms, unfazed by the distance that separates them from the ground.

They are practicing for the opening night of Kooza, one of Cirque du Soleil's touring shows that combines acrobatics with clown acts. For the first time in 10 years, the company will perform in Austin — from Sept. 2 until Oct. 8. Then they will collapse the big top and move on to the next city.

One of the Kooza performers, Angel Quiros, is a sixth-generation circus member who has performed on the high wire with Cirque du Soleil for more than eight years. Quiros said he began practicing high wire when he was 12, with his father as his coach and his brother as his teammate.

"In the beginning, my mind was telling me 'Oh, what am I doing up here?'" Quiros said. "But we love the high wire, and little by little, we got better."

Kooza, which originates from the Sanskrit word "koza," meaning treasure or box, tells the story of a lost character who embarks on a journey of self-discovery. The two-and-a-half hour show features acts such as contortion and trapeze in addition to high wire. Cirque du Soleil publicist Kala Peterson said attendees can expect '70s funk-inspired live music, extravagant custom-made costumes and a more intimate vibe than their larger arena shows.

Peterson said most of the 48 performers in Kooza cross-train in addition to practicing their acts. A warm-up room lined with brightly colored mats and racks of dumbbells is located behind the stage. In one corner, elaborate costumes hang from the walls next to a table of styrofoam heads. Across the room, a low wire — 2.5 feet off the ground — stretches wall-to-wall, awaiting Quiros and his crew.

Although Quiros said he practices low wire every day, he practices high wire three times per week. But despite years of practice, Quiros had an accident while performing for a different company 15 years ago. During training, he fell off the high wire and broke several bones. Since then, he has been accident-free. He said that at some point, every high wire artist has their one "close call."

"It took me a few years to recover," Quiros said. "But my mind was telling me, 'I want to go back,' so I went back."

Quiros said he has always dreamed of performing high wire for Cirque du Soleil alongside his brother. After more than eight years of performing, Quiros has no plans of leaving Kooza. He said he physically feels great, loves his act and is treated well by Cirque du Soleil.

During the show, Quiros darts across the wire sometimes with his brother on his shoulders, other times with a heavy bar in his hands. Although he understands the risk he faces every time he steps onto the wire, he said he is not afraid.

"If you have fear, you cannot do this," Quiros said.