

Ritualistic unity

Community comes together through performing arts and the Day of the Dead

Dia de los Muertos dates back more than 3000 years. But it hasn't been until the last decade or so that the observation of this annual Mexican holiday has become increasingly popular here in the States. Rather than mourning the death of loved ones, Day of the Dead is a community-wide gathering with the sole purpose of commemorating the lives of loved ones passed, and welcoming them home.

Joanie Grant, Program Director at Flagstaff Aerial Arts, saw an opportunity to bring together a diverse group of performing arts enthusiasts for exactly that: a Day of the Dead celebration that brings together the community through various artforms with Dia de los Muertos: A Dance, Art and Aerial Extravaganza Friday and Saturday downtown and at the Green Room. Flag Aerial Arts, the Circler Sisters, Circus Bacchus, Serendipity's Kiss, NAU Latin Dance Club, Canyon Movement Co., Sambatuque, Human Nature Dance Theatre, Emma

Gardner, and more have been working diligently to really introduce Flagstaff as a whole to this hauntingly beautiful tradition.

Flag Aerial Arts, the brainchild of Grant, has exploded in popularity since its doors first opened in mid-April. Once only offering aerial hoop and silk, the menu of opportunities now includes pole, trapeze, Dance for Parkinson's, comedy improv workshops and more, and it only continues to grow.

"We really wanted to find a way to bring the performing arts of Flagstaff and the community together. We were going for a sense of unity between the two, and I think we're going to achieve that," Grant says in a recent *Flag Live* interview. Many long hours of brainstorming, planning, practicing, coordinating and creating have gone into this event. It took a strong alliance and the hard work of many talented individuals to make it a reality.

It's hard to describe in words the raw beauty and talent that Flag Aerial Arts delivers.



Joan Grant (front) followed by Hilary Giovale, Heather Levin and cast. All photos by Scott Sawyer



Kayley Monsta, with golden wings, dances during dress rehearsal

Seemingly fearless, with mind blowing agility, the performers *dance* high above the ground on nothing more than silks, trapeze and hoops. When I first heard of them, they were described to me as similar to Cirque du Soleil. While I agree there are some real similarities between the two, there is something truly unique about our group in town. They seemingly embody the true nature of Flagstaff. The wardrobe, the costumes, the delivery, every aspect of the production and its performers represents a part of our vibrant community.

Take all of that and add in the caliber and explosion of talent of the other collaborating performers and artists in town, and the end result is something truly unique. The Circler Sisters have taken hula hoops and turned them into

much more than child's play; Circus Bacchus with its endless eccentricities—continually pushes the envelope of the performing arts scene in Flagstaff; and the beautiful dance of Serendipity's Kiss, Canyon Movement Co., and Human Nature Dance Theatre. Accentuating this eclectic group of artists will be talented local painter, Emma Gardner. Chances are good, that even if you don't know her by name, you know her pieces. Gracing the spaces of many downtown businesses are her beautifully funky Day of the Dead themed paintings. Joining her on the brushes will also be Kayley Monsta and Siera Smyth.

The two-day celebration is expected to be nothing short of spectacular, featuring everything from a costume party and contest with elaborate costumes, a procession with live



From left: Ginger Van Divier, Hilary Giovale and Heather Levin, practice a dance routine before this weekend's performances.



Lauren Reid works her way high up on the silks.

music and two performances to cap off each of the evening's festivities. Both shows will include a collaboration of music, dance, silks, belly dancing and hula. Additionally, Saturday evening's performance will feature a provocative pole routine, while a "less risqué" matinee of the show will be on Sunday afternoon, where all ages are welcome to attend.

"The main message we want to drive home is that *anyone* can participate in Flagstaff Aerial Arts," Grant says. "All walks of life and skill set are welcome to come and learn the art of what we do—you definitely do not have to be at a performance level."

Grant has a long history with the performing arts. She arrived in Flagstaff expecting to find an aerial arts community bigger than the one she left in Colorado, but was surprised at its infancy. She sought out the few established

instructors in town and proposed joining forces. And it is through the hard work and passion of that small group that Flag Aerial Arts was born.

"We felt it was important to find a way to build unity between the community and the arts," she says. "Day of the Dead is a beautiful tradition of honoring those who have gone before us, and with the growing popularity in the last 10 years, we thought it was a perfect fit for Flagstaff."

The hope is that the group can share their passion and love for the arts scene with everyone in Flagstaff, and introduce their style to those who may not yet know it exists. The proceeds from the weekend's two shows will support the Circus Arts Studio who, going forward, looks to continue to push the growing performing arts scene here in Flagstaff.

Festivities officially kick off on Sat, Nov. 1 in Heritage Square with a free community costume and face painting party at 6 p.m., followed by a downtown procession of colorful flowing skirts, flowers, painted sugar skulls and dancing led by the music of Sambatuque at 7 p.m. The procession will conclude at the Green Room, 15 N. Aggasiz, where the weekend's first performance will follow at 8 p.m. It all begins again on Sun, Nov. 2 at 2 p.m. with a second free community party, Sambatuque procession at 3 p.m. and the Sunday family matinee at 4 p.m.

Tickets for each of the performances are \$10 in advance and \$15 the day of the show. Kids are \$7 during the Sunday show only. For more info about the shows, visit www.flagstaff-greenroom.com. To learn more about Flagstaff Aerial Arts, the Circus Arts Studio or to sign up for upcoming class and sessions, see www.flagstaffaerial.org. 📍