

# DIVA OF THE RINGS

*Cirque du Soleil performer Alevtyna Titarenko does everything her own way. She doesn't lift weights, doesn't diet. Yet look at her. She tells Toni Krasicki her secrets.*

Cirque du Soleil acrobatic gymnast Alevtyna Titarenko claims she's afraid of heights. But in the latest Cirque du Soleil show to tour Australia, Totem, a ripped and shimmering Titarenko flies and spins up to 12 metres above the stage alongside two similarly ripped male artists. Titarenko's strength in The Rings Trio act is sensational, and a one-of-a-kind for a female artist.

Essentially a male apparatus, the rings almost broke Titarenko when she began creating the act. "In the first week my whole body went into a spasm and I almost packed my suitcase," she explains. "But I'm not someone that gives up, and I need to prove to myself that I can do it."

At 37, Ukrainian-born Titarenko has clocked up 17 years with the company, which includes four shows as well as three creations. "I never wanted to be in a circus," she explains. "When the opportunity came up with Cirque du Soleil I didn't want

to go as I was doing my sport acrobatics and studying."

The dedication to her craft is visibly etched into her incredibly defined upper body, including an enviable six-pack. She swears her well-honed physique is due partly to genetics and to her six-day-a-week on-stage performances.

"Basically, to be able to do the

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performance on stage, you have to be able to do the act three to five times in a row backstage, then you know you have enough strength to do it," she says of

her training. "Some people say, 'Seven minutes! What's so hard about that?' But seven minutes on stage takes years of preparation and needs 45 minutes to an hour of warming up before going on to perform."

It's hard not to be impressed by her athleticism as she casually strikes a few poses while suspended from the rings for the photographer. She even dispels

the myth that not all Cirque performers do Pilates. Titarenko isn't a fan, nor does she lift weights, saying that working out on the rings in itself trains her upper body and core, and she barely enjoys the 20 minutes of cardio on the elliptical trainer she forces herself to do.

The challenge of creating new acts and working with other artists is what sparks her interest. "I've done seven different acts in all those shows so basically I love the change; learning, creating and performing," she says. In Totem, she's also the dance captain in the Bollywood finale and in Hand-to-Hand, a back-up act she performs with her partner, each matching their immense physical strength and artistic precision against one another. I ask if they ever argue. "All the time!" she laughs.

Titarenko insists

that her on-stage character does not reflect her personality. "I play a diva and I'm not that in real life, but it's fun to go out there and interact with the guys and be this character," she explains. Her acting skills, coupled with her lean and sculpted physique, have won her several amateur international Female Fitness titles since 2008.

There's no time for preparation as competitions are squeezed in during vacations or in between cities if touring. "I don't follow any strict diet, and the other competitors hate me for it. I can't afford to because I need the energy to go on stage," she says. "In between acts I sew my bikinis and at the end of the show, at around midnight, I practice my routine – sometimes I think I am nuts!"

