

Las Vegas Impresario Bets Big on Atlantic City with The Hook (Exclusive First Look)

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1. *The Hook - Theater - Spiegelworld - Atlantic City*

It took Spiegelworld’s Ross Mollison more than a decade to agree to do a show in Atlantic City. The self-dubbed “impresario extraordinaire,” who holds the keys to three of Las Vegas’ most successful productions — Absinthe at Caesars Palace, neon-Western extravaganza Atomic Saloon at Venetian and salacious interplanetary odyssey OPM at The Cosmopolitan — was not convinced that the blighted casino enclave would be able to recapture its early 20th century entertainment capital of the eastern seaboard prowess. That was until Caesars Entertainment made Mollison an offer he couldn’t refuse: a great storyline.

Mollison, Spiegelworld’s ringmaster, would have the opportunity to create the Atlantic City Boardwalk’s first live entertainment and dining residency — playing every week of the year — exactly to his specifications behind the refurbished façade of the historic Warner Theatre. It is all part of a \$400 million renovation of Caesars Atlantic City Hotel & Casino, which Mollison likes to joke was mostly spent on him — and a Nobu restaurant, Gordon Ramsay Hell’s Kitchen and over 700 new rooms and suites.

“When they said I could have a theater right on the boardwalk. I said, ‘Are you fucking kidding? This is incredible.’ I got excited when I saw the façade and then did the research,” Mollison shares with The Hollywood Reporter during an exclusive first look at The Hook.

Resurrecting the Warner, dubbed the “Wonder Theatre of the World” when it was built in 1929, involved turning the space — which was converted into a bowling alley in the ’60s, then a pizza parlor in the ’70s, before being demolished for the Wild Wild West Casino — back into a theater to match its Boardwalk-facing façade.

What he devised is The Hook, a variety show with adult-comedy hosts, acrobats and variety artists from around the world, coupled with an East Coast version of Superfrico restaurant, which bills itself as an “Italian American Psychedelic” eatery. And thus, writing another chapter in the live entertainment production company’s journey of creating “submersive entertainment for savvy, seen-it-all adult audiences.” In 2011, Mollison dosed Las Vegas with Absinthe, a raucous cocktail party-cum-live show-cum-nightclub. Audiences were encouraged to drink from the bars during the show while performers appeared on a central stage only nine feet in diameter. The content was ripe with material about sex and drugs — topics not normally uttered in the casino-resort environment and a complete reversal from the polished grip that Cirque du Soleil had on the Strip for decades. Absinthe was a hit and audiences proved hungry for more. Shows at The Venetian and The Cosmopolitan followed, while Superfrico restaurant, along with the Ski Lodge bar, opened in 2021.

What Mollison has arguably done in Las Vegas is create a new form of live entertainment that blends all the elements of hospitality — food, drink, art, architecture — and he’s now bringing it to Atlantic City.

The spectacle starts on the boardwalk before entering the Warner with the aptly titled Cheval de Plongée (Diving Horse), a boîte located next to the entrance. The name diving horse pays tribute to one of Atlantic City’s most absurd bygone attractions where aquatic-loving horses would dive into the ocean, unharmed. This iteration features outdoor seating, ocean views and a walk-up window, serving Superfrico’s chicken parm sandwiches and cocktails appropriately named Saltwater Barnum and Thunderhoof.

At the entry, the façade of the Warner Theatre has been redone with etched stained glass panels by Melbourne-based artist Mark Ogge depicting Spiegelworld characters (The Gazillionaire and the Green Fairy from Absinthe, an alien from OPM, penguins from Superfrico); Las Vegas icon Liberace; and Atlantic City characters (sailors, a cowgirl on a diving horse, John F. Kennedy, a lobster lady and dancing crab). A recurring figure, the octopus, represents Mollison, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that he is always working on a million things and needs eight arms.

Mollison believes you should never walk more than a few feet without stumbling upon a bar, and Horse Dive Bar serves cocktails right inside The Hook lobby. From there, guests travel down a hallway resembling a bowling lane — meant to pay homage to the Warner’s post-theatrical days — and enter into the main performance space, encountering yet another bar called Tides Out. “This is where I will watch the show most nights,” Mollison proclaims over the theater which seats 420 people throughout the main floor and balcony.

Additional artwork by Ogg extends around the theater and the proscenium, mimicking the same motifs from the stained-glass façade; Juliet balconies for artists to pop up; a revolving stage that lifts into the air

and custom purpose-built cocktail tables that go with every duo of seats. (“It has taken us three years to get them right,” he shares.)

“This is the dream,” Mollison says. “It is so unusual because we are used to living out of a tent at the front of Caesars.”

He is unfazed by any of the challenges that the revitalization of Atlantic City may present. “I live in St. Kilda in Melbourne. In the early 20th century, it was the fanciest part of Melbourne. Luna Park is there and it has very much a Coney Island vibe. Then prostitution moved in after World War II with drugs and all sorts of shit, and it went to hell,” he says. “It slowly came out of that and it still has its raw elements. It has the beach and sand. I love the history of this whole place. We’re not here to save Atlantic City, but I think we will be a draw.”

He points to the population shift from New York City to New Jersey’s bedroom and shore communities as a factor to drive audiences to the boardwalk for a night out on the town.

“The Hook is the zenith of this model for creating life-changing experiences, and Atlantic City is the perfect place to open it: a goldmine of untapped potential a mere two hours from Broadway,” he says.

Developing The Hook

Mollison gave director Cal McCrystal one mission to fulfill when developing The Hook.

“He said, ‘I want you to make a show that is so good that people will come to Atlantic City from New York and Philadelphia in the winter to see it.’ It’s a tall order,” recalls McCrystal, who also directed OPM and Atomic Saloon. McCrystal, who is Irish and now lives in London, grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey. “I know you can’t tell, but I had an American accent when I was a kid.”

An actor, director and clown, McCrystal was physical comedy director for the James Corden-starring West End and Broadway revivals of One Man, Two Guvnors; directed the 2022 West End pantomime Mother Goose with Sir Ian McKellan; and also works as a comedy consultant for the film industry with credits including The Dictator, The World’s End, Man Up, The Nice Guys, The Amazing Spider-Man 2, and Paddington 1 and 2.

“In 2018, Ross came over to London and took me out for dinner and said, ‘Would you like to work with us? And I said, ‘Sure.’ I hadn’t seen Absinthe, but I’d heard of it. He invited me to come work on OPM, and while I was doing that, he showed me a derelict venue at The Venetian and asked, ‘What kind of a show would you like to do here?’ I said, ‘Well, this to me looks like an old Dodge City saloon at the turn of the century. I would do a Western with young, beautiful people presided over by a mean hag.’ That became the Atomic Saloon,” McCrystal recounts.

“Last year, I came here, and it was all a casino, the Wild, Wild West, and just a façade of the theater. It’s quite an ambitious thing to pull off. We all have to live up to this façade and build something that people will believe was always here.”

McCrystal shares that the development of The Hook proceeded unscripted. “Spiegelworld wanted to create a show about the ocean, but I want to make a show about a theater ... well why don’t we do both. I didn’t really decide what the plot would be or what the script would be until I got everyone in the room together. There’s no point in me writing a part in my head for an acrobat, and then you find out they

can't actually carry a story. Casting is really important to me. I make the show for the people who are in it and for the people who are going to see it."

First and foremost, Spiegelworld develops its shows around the acts, who, in the instance of The Hook, are comedians, acrobats and circus performers from nine countries spanning four continents.

Tony Award-winning scenic designer Christine Jones, scenic designer Brett J. Banakis and associate scenic designer Matthew Buttrey, create The Hook's onstage world. Jones and Banakis most recently collaborated on The Devil Wears Prada musical, and are best known for their work together on Broadway's American Idiot and Harry Potter and the Cursed Child. (They have musicals in development based on The Outsiders, The Notebook and Thelma and Louise.)

"This is the first time I can think of that we designed a show that didn't have a script. It had a premise, a big idea, an old vaudeville production that gets massively interrupted," Banakis says. "The show uses the different skills the various artists bring to the table, and we curate all of the scenic visual language into one space. On any show, you want to have a seed of an idea but leave breathing room for it to change and shift and move with what's being created."

McCrystal worked with Stacy Clark, a former Cirque du Soleil casting director who lives in Montreal, and "has her fingers in all the agents' pies and knows who's around," he says. "We are a circus. The audience doesn't really want to see too much storyline, because the show is the acts. We have all these really beautiful people doing extraordinarily brave and astonishing things. And that has to be the focus. The audience does enjoy a comedic narrative that weaves the whole thing together."

Leading the comedy team are comedian, actor and musician Phil Nichol, who recently starred in the West End musical, Everybody's Talking About Jamie; actor Scout Durwood from Oxygen's Funny Girls and MTV's Mary & Jane, and Brooklyn-based clown and physical comedian Jarrod Bates.

The Hook also showcases circus performers such as aerial straps specialists Reed Kelly and Jack Dawson as well as aerial hoop artist, dancer and contortionist Angie McIlroy-Wagar, who performs a unique combination of acrobatics, contortion and waacking, a dance style of dramatic poses and lightning-speed arm movements.

Dawson and Kelly, who previously performed with Cirque du Soleil, have been vying for a spot within the company for years.

"We are excited to finally get the chance to work with Spiegelworld and to collaborate with them under their vision to create something that's never been done before in Atlantic City," Kelly says.

"You very rarely go to a job where the space has been freshly created, and you're the first ones using it," Dawson says, noting that behind their two-person act, there is a team of 10 people behind the scenes providing support.

Resident director Emily Abrams will be given the keys to The Hook on July 22 and McCrystal will be back at least once a year to fine-tune.

Backstage at Superfrico

Set in the backstage of Warner Theatre, Superfrico Atlantic City is an extension of the performance space but not part of the ticketed Hook shows, which play at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m.

Although new, the restaurant is given a patina with old props from a bygone Christmas production, wardrobe items hanging everywhere, a discarded giant lobster claw and even the curtain from Phantom of the Opera.

Everybody who comes to the restaurant will go through the theater. Even during a performance, you can watch five minutes on the way to dinner. “I love the idea of putting the restaurant in the dressing rooms. When you build your own theater, you get to do it properly,” Mollison says. “The restaurant door says ‘office’ and you feel like you are really coming into the backstage area. The level of integration of the restaurant into theater — there’s nothing like it. Hopefully, it’s a disorientating experience for people.”

He chose to bring the “psychedelic pizza party” vibe of Superfrico from Las Vegas because “New Jersey is the heart of Italian American cuisine.”

In the restaurant, everything is bespoke — from the commissioned artwork by Matthew Day Jackson and Randy Polumbo to the knives and the pasta and the pizza oven, which he says pumps out more of Superfrico’s signature square pies than the human hand can make.

Mollison inspects the new cutlery that just arrived from David Mellor in London — embossed with Superfrico’s mascot, the Penguin. The plates are custom-made and color-coordinated to go with the dishes they will serve.

What’s Next

The Hook began previews on June 30 and will host a grand opening celebration on July 21. Spiegelworld’s partnership with Caesars continues to expand in Las Vegas with Disco Show set to debut at The Linq in June 2024 and a new, yet-to-be-titled production in New Orleans, which Mollison has committed to being open in time for the Super Bowl in 2025.

Aggressively developing new shows, Mollison is unfazed by the competition from the multi-billion dollar residency market that has driven many Las Vegas stage productions into mothballs. “People don’t come to Vegas very often for one night. They come to Adele. And then the second night they come see our show and come to our restaurant,” he says.

With so much content to sell, Spiegelworld developed its own internal marketing platform called Krakenwerx, which tethers directly to the hotel reservations system.

“When you book a room, you instantly get a prompt, ‘Would you like to go to a show? Or make a restaurant reservation?’ It’s all one data set — we notice if a customer has come back three times in one year, they must be a Spiegelworld superfan, and we can do something special for the guest,” he says.

“It’s also helped because we know how many of our Absinthe fans are based on the East Coast. As we are opening, we are promoting to them. The marketing challenges around ticketing are enormous, and in addition to our system, we still do work with AXS and Ticketmaster — and then we decide who we allocate to in various other places.”

Mollison’s hoped-for grand success of Krakenwerx to sell out all his shows will fuel another one of his latest innovations: Circus Town, USA.

Last year, Spiegelworld purchased the town of Nipton, California, and is in the process of rebuilding it into a performing mecca.

Circus Town will be the world headquarters. It will serve as the center of the Spiegelworld universe, where new acts are created and where new shows test run. There will also be a restaurant and a hotel built out of 70-year-old caravans.

Sitting in his dream theater at the helm of his newest spectacle, Mollison acknowledges that none of his dreams have been fulfilled at a discount — and he expects the same from Nipton.

“It all has to be rebuilt properly,” he says. “It’ll take us another two years to get it open ... and millions of dollars.”