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Death-defying acts

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With 'Shadowlands' and Cirque's 'Corteo,' Dallas stages can be dangerous

"Corteo" is Italian for "cortege" (another term for a "funeral procession"), which is the theme of Cirque du Soleil's newest tour. But on opening night, death moved from the realm of theatrical fantasy to a grim and real possibility when, during the final acrobatic number, one of the gymnasts fell from the parallel bars. He laid motionless on the mats as EMTs rushed him off stage while the audience sat in eerie, stony silence. Seconds later, the remaining cast members took their bows and the show was over.



Repressed novelist C.S. Lewis (James Crawford) finds true love — briefly — with an American intellectual (Diane Worman) in "Shadowlands." (Photo by George Wada)

It was a gruesome, downbeat conclusion, even for a show that embraces mortality as its topic. It also served as a sad reminder that as thrilling as a circus can be, the athletes on stage are engaged in risky behavior. Sure, the risk lends a whiff of excitement, but the circus isn't an air show or NASCAR — nobody wants to see someone get hurt.

Until that moment, "Corteo" was engaging precisely because it is less about the outrageous, death-cheating theatrics that Cirque is known for, and more about the retro appeal of an old-time circus: giants and little people, tightrope acts and jugglers, hot, shirtless men on the flying trapeze (and rolling inside glorified Hula Hoops called Cyr wheels, which were pretty damn cool).

The approach has its downsides: Some acts are a tad dull, and the show doesn't build momentum to an inevitable, "Oh, wow!" denouement. Still, the outline of a plot and English-language dialogue help "Corteo" to stand out. Just remember to cross your fingers and hold your breath during the finale: No one wants a repeat of opening night.

What happened at "Corteo" was an accident. But there's also something borderline sadistic about the Contemporary Theatre of Dallas' conscious decision to open "Shadowlands" just in time for Valentine's Day. A play about a lonely, middle-aged man who finally finds a mate, only to have her struck down with a terminal illness doesn't exactly scream "Happy Feb. 14, sweetheart!"

Or maybe it does.

Lots of good romances are tragic, or at least end sadly. Sometimes, the sadness magnifies the tenderness — the whole "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" bit. But where do you draw the line between schmaltzy melodrama ("Love Story" is the exemplar) and genuine, high-minded, bittersweet love (say, "Brokeback Mountain")?

You could say "Shadowlands" is that line. The playwright, William Nicholson, traffics in deeper meanings of life than mere saccharine cooing or sweaty, fingernails-down-the-back lust. The central character in this true story, the British author and Christian theorist C.S. Lewis (James Crawford), has spent the better part of his 50-plus years living almost entirely within his own mind. He sleepwalks through a chaste life with his older brother, content to talk about loving devotion but never to experience it.

Then he meets Joy Gresham (Diane Worman), an abrasive but disarmingly intellectual divorcee from New York. At first, her pushy manner scares him off. But even while Lewis' friends sniff at her bourgeois Americanism, he is drawn to her. His moral rectitude makes it impossible for him to act on his feelings, but he eventually lets his guard down — only to be blindsided when Joy contracts bone cancer.

“Shadowlands” is “about” things in the way many love stories are not. While the dialogue can be heady and ripe with abstractions, Nicholson always brings it back to actual people.

Already a consistently watchable actress, Worman is perfectly in her element here. She’s not afraid to be big and raw, and Joy is nothing if not loud. Upon her entrance, she annoys the audience as much as Lewis’ puffy, snobbish colleague Christopher (Scott Milligan, whose line-readings are distractingly stilted), so it says something that she’s able to win them over. Her unnerving ability to turn ashen and weak before our eyes is no doubt a factor — her transformation can be chilling.

Crawford matches her in the depth of his characterization. His growth from doctrinaire academic to sensitive caregiver is achingly real.

Still, “Shadowlands” is not the tearjerker it could have been. The theater leaves boxes of tissue at every table for dabbing at the eyes; ours remained untouched. But that’s a good thing. A more cloying production would have made sobbing the *raison d’etre* of the show; here, humanity is. That may be the greatest expression of true romance.

“Shadowlands,” Greenville Center for the Arts, 5601 Sears St. Through March 4. Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays–Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. \$27. 214-828-0094.

“Corteo,” under the Grand Chapiteau at Fair Park. Through March 4. Tuesdays–Saturdays at 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday matinees at 4 p.m., Sundays at 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. \$28–\$75. 800-678-5440.

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