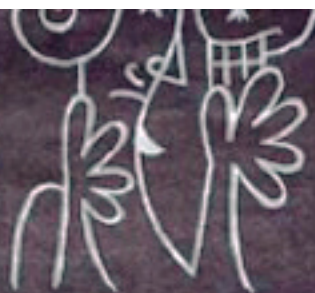


# Stage



## The Bright Side of Death

*El Circo de la Muerte* offers a snappy revue of mortality

BY JIMMY FOWLER

**T**he indefatigable Cora Cardona, artistic director of *Teatro Dallas*, has threatened on occasions when the itinerant troupe cannot find a stage to pitch a tent in a parking lot and perform there. OK, so it's not a parking lot for the 2000 edition of their annual *Día de los Muertos* performance, *El Circo de la Muerte* (The Circus of the Dead). They did what no other homeless theater has thought to—went to Shakespeare Festival of Dallas honcho Cliff Redd and asked to rent the Samuell-Grand Park amphitheater during the off-season. I'm glad Redd agreed to work with them, and I hope Teatro and other companies can use this venue again during temperate non-summer months of the year (which, in Texas, is pretty much all of them).

Cardona and her design crew are using the stage nontraditionally: They stretched a waterproof circus tent over a metal frame and invited the audience underneath to share a conversational performance experience with the actors, dancers, magicians, and those who jump between categories. What has been sacrificed is sweep. The designated stage area is a small strip, and at no time is this more apparent than when Nova Dancing Company bends and swirls

bloodstained ritualism and grab-your-lapels, "gotcha!" moments of past Teatro dead days—although the latter are approached when *La Catrina* (Mark O'Dell), a skull-faced debutante, crashes in unexpectedly with strobe lights pulsing. She made me yearn for edgier, more explicit references to the mortal coil she dons and doffs as easily as a fox fur.

There is also less of a sense of Mexican history with this celebration of memories in three-dimensional form. One of the more entertaining fellows of the evening was a top-hatted, ghoulish trickster named Bizarro who, vaudeville-style and with the aforementioned Goth rock-pounding away around him, proves that eye, hand, throat, and other body parts are disposable and, at times, interchangeable. But he would seem to be only tangentially related to dead festivities.

Ditto Michael Garcia's *The Downward Climb*, in which the barefoot performance artist swooped and knelt and leaped seemingly unaware of the limited space around him. Garcia is a masked businessman with a briefcase who, at first, seems to get an almost mystical satisfaction from his corporate ambitions. But things don't happen as he plans, and he suddenly becomes aware of—to tie it in with the death theme—his own dying soul. Garcia has mastered a lunatic style of half-ballet, half-pratfall that makes all this funnier and less ponderous than it sounds on paper.

*El Circo de la Muerte* runs through Nov. 12 at the Shakespeare Festival of Dallas Amphitheater, Samuell Blvd. Call (214) 741-1135.

*I Hear the Thunder* runs through Nov. 12 at Allied Theatre, University Drive. Call (817) 516-1111.