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Cirque du Soleil: Zarkana

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Cirque du Soleil presents its major new acrobatic spectacle, "Zarkana," at the legendary Radio City Music Hall in New York City for a limited engagement through October 8. "Zarkana" is written and directed by one of Quebec's most highly regarded creators, acclaimed film and theatre director François Girard ("The Red Violin," "Silk"). A keen music lover, Girard is particularly known for the hybrid worlds he creates in which music plays a predominant role. His works are recognized for their great musicality, both in terms of sound and image.

"Zarkana," is a visual vortex set in a slightly twisted musical and acrobatic fantasy universe where, little by little, chaos and craziness give way to festivity and love regained. The diverse cast of more than 75 international artists transports the audience into a fantastical and suspenseful world, blurring the boundaries between the real and imaginary.

With music by composer Nick Littlemore, a protégé of Elton John, "Zarkana" is an acrobatic rock opera that blends circus arts with the surreal to create a world where physical virtuosity rubs shoulders with the strange. The story follows Zark, a magician who has lost his powers -- and the love of his life -- in an

abandoned theatre populated by a motley collection of off-the-wall characters and incomparable acrobats. He runs into the Mutants, four sinister sirens determined to divert him from his quest.

But if you are anything like me, the "plot" of Cirque productions is rarely overt. This ethical circus relies on the skills of the artists to enchant the crowd. And with nearly a dozen different acts, "Zarkana" does not disappoint.

The production, which features fantastical sets and elaborate costumes, opens with a redhead in green, bounce-juggling eight balls. The creatures of this circus came in the form of the many "extras," who skitter around the stage, dressed in white with collars like French clowns.

Balancing acts follow, with a man balancing on a silver ladder while he lifts a woman onto his shoulders. He then balances a second ladder on his head, while the woman climbs it to the rafters, where a catwalk is waiting.

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Then, a satyr emerges from a purple flower near the ceiling, and sings enchantingly as two acrobats do elaborate rope tricks. The red-clad ringmaster Zark is utterly mesmerizing as he sings and introduces the acts. A troupe of flag-handlers tosses butterfly-colored silks across the stage to one another to beautiful effect. A tumbler balances on a beam held by two men as she exacts a series of aerial flips, ending to thunderous applause with four rotations.

A snake charmer theme follows, as a tightrope setup rises from the floor. Four athletes balance on the rope, jumping over each other. Two of the men attach to their shoulders a flat litter holding a chair, upon which a woman takes a seat. As dry ice and flames roll across the stage below, the tumbler rises from her seat, kicks it aside, and the three stand in pyramid formation.

Act I ends with tumblers in costumes bedecked with grape-like balls riding inside of silver hoops. The acrobats take on the hoops, sometimes two at a time, seeming to defy gravity.

With Act II comes a belly-dancing theme, with a woman drawing in sand on a large cauldron,

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projected on to a screen. She is followed by a cadre of inverted clowns rising to the ceiling on umbrellas.

Perhaps in a nod to "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," the stage is transformed into a large spider web. As the clowns climb and frolic on the web, a talented troupe of trapeze artists swing from one perch to another in death-defying tricks. This is the essence of Cirque.

A pair of muscular acrobats follow, adroitly balancing on a rotating, two-wheeled contraption that evokes Evel Knievel. With the high point of the evening reached, the following acts feature hula-hoopers, a gag about an electric chair, and tumblers that stack themselves four people high.

The finale brings the orchestra, tucked away on side platforms, to the middle of the stage as a half-circular set of stairs appears, and is almost magically populated with the cast. Zark finds his true love, the cast of performers takes their bows, and Cirque one again secures its reputation as one of the greatest shows on earth.



"Cirque du Soleil: Zarkana." Rockefeller Center. Through October 8. \$47-130. For tickets, call 866-858-0008 or www.cirquedusoleil.com/zarkana or www.ticketmaster.com

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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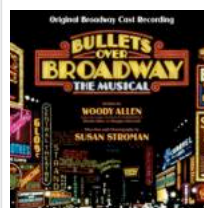
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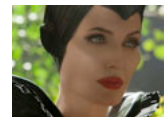




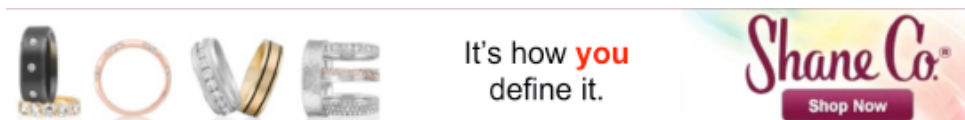
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