

WAS - Circus Arts Legend

Alfredo Codona

2003 Honoree



Codona, the king and his queen, Lillian Leitzel.
Pfening Collection.

A Classy Flyer - Among the first to do a Triple

While Ernest Clarke came to be known as the "father of the triple somersault," Alfredo Codona was considered to be the "triple king." Clarke himself conceded that Codona's triple was more consistent and graceful than his own. Yet the glory of Codona's career contrasted with the bittersweet tragedy of his life.

Alfredo was born in 1893 in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. His father was Edward Codona, a Mexican circus owner. His mother was Hortense Buislay, of the great family of trapeze performers. Art Concello was quoted as saying that Alfredo had an intense desire to refine the art of trapeze. "He couldn't look bad," Concello said, "If Alfredo had been run over by a truck he'd have done it so gracefully that your first instinct might have been to applaud." Born into the circus life, it was said that when Alfredo was in his infancy, his father would carry him into the circus ring in a carpet bag. By the age of four Alfredo was already an accomplished gymnast. His first experience in the aerial arts was a performance on the single trapeze. In 1913 his father formed a flying return act and worked as the catcher for Alfredo and brother, Lalo, and they joined the Wirth Circus in Australia, working with that show for three seasons. Alfredo and Lalo's sister, Victoria, also worked as slack wire performers. In 1916 they teamed up with the Siegrist-Silbon act and performed in their big 14 person act called the Imperial Viennese Troupe with a cross shaped rigging. Codona was described as sometimes being reckless, taking chances practicing without the use of a mechanics belt spotting system. It was said, that Alfredo learned the triple somersault without the use of a spotting belt.

At some point the Codona's father retired. Lalo began catching for the troupe and Steve Outch was brought in as a flyer. Mark St. Leon states that Outch had been a member of the Flying Herberts, and had probably joined the Codona troupe after the Flying Herberts Australian tour. In the Sydney "Pix" Magazine, Outch was quoted as saying that he had been with the Flying Jordans in 1897 and was the first man in Australia to be shot out of a cannon. Later on when Steve Outch left the Codona act, Alfredo and Lalo worked for a time with an Australian aerialist named Vera Bruce who was brought into the act. Alfredo's first wife, Clara Curtin had been married to Indian Groves, a member of the Valentino casting act. She left Groves to marry Alfredo. Clara and Alfredo were divorced in 1927. In 1928 Alfredo and Lillian Leitzel were married in Chicago. Among those in the circus profession, this marriage was considered to be the match of the "King and Queen of the trapeze."

When Lillian Leitzel died in 1931, Alfredo Codona was devastated. It was said that he went into seclusion for a year or two. Alfredo had an elegant monument built over Leitzel's grave where he also intended to be buried.

He became more reckless than before on the trapeze, taking more chances and suffering a series of bad falls into the net. He and Vera Bruce were married in September of 1932. In 1933 he suffered a serious injury from a bad fall into the net. He was never able to perform on the trapeze again. He worked for a time as an equestrian director for the Hagenbeck - Wallace Circus and for the Tom Mix Show. Fortunes for Alfredo then took an even more desperate turn when in 1937, Vera Bruce began the legal process of divorcing Codona. Rumors circulated that Alfredo was depressed because Vera was taking all of Clara Leitzel's personal effects. In all fairness to Vera, it should be pointed out that she must have been tired of living within the shadow of the Leitzel legend, with the spectre of Leitzel's great stone monument ever towering over her. In 1937 Alfredo requested a conference with Vera in her lawyer's office. Alfredo shot her to death before turning the gun upon himself. Alfredo joined Thomas Hanlon as a tragic victim of physical debilitation.

Alfredo Codona was acknowledged for many years to be the finest flyer who ever lived. With the possible exception of Art Concello, no other flyer in history was ever considered to be his equal in performing tricks or creating a graceful image. Even today, he is often considered to be the basis of comparison when measuring a flyer's ability. The name "CODONA" will always be synonymous with GREATNESS when it comes to trapeze work.



The Codona flying act as they appeared with the Ringling Barnum show in 1933.

Alfredo, left, Vera Bruce and Lalo Codona.

Burt Wilson Collection.

Alfredo was the Stunt Double of Johnny Weissmuller, the lead role in "Tarzan and His Mate" (1934): [click here to see some of his tricks!](#)

Credit: The Circus World Museum of Baraboo, Wisconsin.