

Circus life is but a dream

Wit, whimsy are at the heart of charming 'Oratorio'



By Louise Kennedy
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CAMBRIDGE - Aurélia Thierrée performs a delicate balancing act - and not just when she's poised high above the stage on a slender swath of fabric. The real proof of her equilibrium lies in the way she balances whimsy and wit, childlike wonder and adult elan, throughout her quietly magical show, "Aurélia's Oratorio."

Perhaps some of Thierrée's skill can be laid to her family inheritance: She's the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin and the daughter of two performers who essentially reinvented the circus as an art form, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin and Jean-Baptiste Thierrée. And this show, which the American Repertory Theatre is presenting at the Loeb Drama Center, is created and directed by her mother. But Thierrée brings a freshness and charm to the performance that are uniquely her own.

Charm is a slippery gift; it can too easily turn cheap or forced, especially in a performer who's doing the same thing night after night. But Thierrée, wonderfully, exudes charm without drowning us in it. Her grace, her inventive and fluid movement, and above all her humor simply invite our delight.

Delight flowers most fully in the almost dreamlike images that are a hallmark of the family's style of circus performance, which uses traditional skills such as acrobatics and clowning to create theatrical moments of ineffable beauty. Thus "Aurélia's Oratorio" opens with a simple old chest of drawers at center stage; soon the drawers are opening to reveal a hand, a foot, a whole leg, and then arms and legs waving and intertwining in seemingly impossible ways. It's a contortionist act raised to the level of surreal art.

The limbs belong, of course, to Thierrée - or at least most of them do; part of the fun comes when she emerges from the chest and casually pulls at a remaining leg, revealing it as a fake. It's the kind of illusionless illusion that recurs throughout the brief (70 minutes or so) but mesmerizing show. When Thierrée's onstage partner (Jaime Martinez now, to be replaced by Julio Monge Dec. 13) dances with a dress that seems almost alive, or climbs up a softly draped curtain as if it were a cliff, we're allowed to glimpse just enough of the hanger or the contours of a hidden ladder to let us know how the trick is done. Instead of puzzling over the mechanics, we're freed to revel in the image.

And there are images to revel in aplenty, from those animated bits of clothing to the shape-shifting swirls of red draperies to a truly magical "snowscape" built of yards and yards of lace - there's even what you might call an Abominable Lace Man. Many of the images take everyday objects and upend our expectations of them, sometimes literally: Thierrée admires a handful of flowers, then arranges them in a vase - stems up; she buys a cone from a strolling vendor, but the vendor is carrying a basket of flames, not ice, and the cone is apparently burning hot; when her alarm clock starts clanging, she lies down to sleep.

As these vignettes unfold, they take on the quality of a dream, with each strange moment adding resonance to the ones that have gone before. The dream turns a little darker with the introduction of some antique puppets, who watch a puppet theater of their own in which Thierrée's head - just her head, the rest of her body concealed by black cloth - performs as its own weird kind of puppet. It gets darker still when one of the puppets tries to seduce, then molest, its human partner.

That scene might be a little too intense for the youngest viewers (and a little too creepy even for adult ones), but it's fleeting, and a tinge of darker emotions is perhaps what keeps the show from being cloying. What's a little more unsettling is that it seems, briefly, to be introducing some element of plot. A few other moments, too, as when Martinez occasionally runs across the stage calling, "Aurélia!," feel as if they're the start of a story, or maybe the middle. But we never quite get whatever story goes along with the moments; we'd be better off with either more story, or none at all.

Dreams don't always make sense either, of course. And, like the best dreams, "Aurélia's Oratorio" leaves us with images - those seedily elegant draperies, that blizzarding lace - that are rich and haunting enough to form a kind of story in themselves.

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