

THEATER REVIEW

'Oratorio' a symphony of tricks in time



Aurélia Thierrée stars in "Aurélia's Oratorio," conceived and directed by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin. *Richard Haughton*

By James Hebert
THEATER CRITIC

She coaxes music from clocks and turns to sand in an hourglass, and if you go see Aurélia you just might have the time of her life.

"Aurélia's Oratorio," the lyrical and lo-fi circus at La Jolla Playhouse, is all about time. Or about the illusion of time. Or maybe it's an illusion to believe the meaning of this elegant and fine-boned show, as palpable as a handful of smoke, can be shoehorned inside a single noun.

Let's try this: "Aurélia's Oratorio" is about 70 minutes long,

DETAILS

"Aurélia's Oratorio"

La Jolla Playhouse

When: Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 7:30 p.m.; Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m., through Feb. 28

Where: Mandell Weiss Theatre, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive

Tickets: \$25-\$45

Phone: (858) 550-1010

Online: lajollaplayhouse.org

and it is about time it has come here (for a monthlong run), after some six years of worldwide touring.

SEE 'Oratorio,' E4



Aurélia Thierrée plays a mini-orchestra of alarm clocks.

'ORATORIO'

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Odd characters are played by Jaime Martinez

Aurélia Thierrée, a granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin, is at the center of the charming, disarming, sensual spectacle. She grew up in the alternative circuses that her parents, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin (the show's director) and Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, created starting in the '70s.

Her "Oratorio" balls up music and illusions into one big fistful of

whimsy. It feels like what might happen inside a music box when the lid is closed at night.

This is not the all-out acrobatics and dazzle of the circuses that Thierrées helped inspire; not Cirque du Soleil. Maybe Cirque du So Laid Back.

The show may be near-wordless, but Aurélia, she's all tock. Her alter ego in the piece keeps asking curious characters played by her fellow performer, Jaime Martinez, for the time.

Trouble is, she can't make heads or tails of them. Literally. Her first encounter is with an ostrichlike passer-by consisting of Martinez walking on his hands and wearing fabric around his torso and a hat on his feet.

Thierrée is a little disjointed herself. (Again: literally.) Her first act is to emerge from a dresser, limbs all akimbo and bickering with each other as they poke from separate drawers.

The production's guiding principle, inspired by medieval drawings of an upside-down world, is of an existence that's been thrown into reverse and turned topsy-turvy.

So Thierrée mashes flowers bloom-first into a vase; hangs laundry on a line and then waters it; grabs a cab and rides inverted like a bat. In these inside-out digs, clothes clobber those who try to wear them, and puppets sit halfheartedly for skits put on by a human.

Thierrée and Martinez pull off one cleverly choreographed duet that has them tussling over a coat, which turns from red to black every time it jumps owners. Other dreamlike scenes flit by, some seductive, some disturbing, some both. There's an arresting vignette of Thierrée behind a lacy scrim, roused by a fierce morning light. A friendly rabbit hops by in silhouette. Then a toothy creature pops in and bites off Thierrée's foot. For good measure, it proceeds to unspool her leg like a loose-threaded sweater. (What did Shakespeare say about a "sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care"? Clearly, Aurélia needs some z's.)

Not everything clicks. A hairy

gnome slouches in like a rejected auditioner from Nightmare Casting Inc. He gathers his little imp gang to menace Thierrée, then promptly offs himself. It's like Sartre meets "Sesame Street." One dance scene between Thierrée and Martinez also feels like an unscheduled layover in the piece's flight of fancy.

But other elements tick — such as the music, a mix of brooding madrigals and ominous drums and jaunty, accordion-driven (and very French) pop confections.

The beating heart of the piece, though, seems the fixation on time — how it's both eternal and, at least for living things, finite. After Thierrée plays a mini-orchestra of alarm clocks and then takes on the form of an hourglass, she has a final, surreal scene (it would ruin the effect to detail it here) that suggests a lurid but actually pretty rapturous death.

Time's up.

(Fortunately, in the "Oratorio," up is not up.)

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