

Review: 'Aurelia's Oratorio'

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Moments of whimsy and wonder highlight "Aurelia's Oratorio," a cleverly crafted production starring Aurelia Thierree, a performer of grace and playfulness who is the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin. Created and directed by the star's mother, the show is made up of a series of brief episodes that evoke the traditions of theater, mime, magic, dance, vaudeville and circus.

The imaginative, nonverbal vignettes and show's short length should prove popular with American auds as it continues its brief U.S. tour, though marketing may prove tricky for what-is-it-exactly literalists. (Dates are set at Dartmouth College, June 22-25, and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, June 26-July 1.)

It may be unfair to evoke their famous heritage, but there must be something in the Chaplin family DNA that gives the show's creator and star the ability to charm and startle with such beguiling ease. Thierree had the aud at bonjour.

The intimate show's sophistication and occasional darkness — a (fake) baby smoking, a puppet suicide, several lost limbs — give the perf its European distinction that helps in avoiding preciousness but may also be off-putting to

some. Yet it is also a show of wit and beauty, with haunting stage images — recommended for audiences aged 10 and older.

Narrative-slim piece begins with the lithe and wide-eyed beauty emerging, one appendage at a time, from the drawers of a large wooden bureau. Once outfitted and free, Aurelia fabricates an escape up the red velvet proscenium drapes and tasseled ropes. It also offers an opportunity for Thierree to display a soupçon of Cirque gymnastic and aerial skills.

She is soon joined by dancer Julio Monge, a fitting and energetic partner in this flight into a surreal theatrical world both upside-down and inside-out. Monge's fierce running battle with a vicious overcoat is a standout.

Sometimes the skits are simply one-note sight gags: Aurelia blithely coming out onstage holding a still fan as her head flaps about it to create a breeze. A grounded kite that flies a stringed Aurelia in the wind. A shadow figure walking upright while its real-person counterpart follows step by step on the ground.

Other times the imagery has a disturbing, dreamlike beauty: a puppet show run amok, a bustier that devours its wearer, the discovery of a hole in a torso through which a toy train can run.

Frequently, however, the show seems too much a trifle with sketches that lack focus, force and follow-through. Skits have a stop-start quality and miss the connective tissue that could allow the pieces to add up to a more potent whole.

Music and sound accompaniment are refreshingly offbeat. Thomas Dobruszkes' lights are expert, setting an alternating mysterious and upbeat mood and providing cover for some of the quick-change transformations.