

The discovery channeler: Aurelia Thierrée

She likes it when audiences spin their own narratives for ‘Aurelia’s Oratorio’ — ‘I discover things through them. I love listening to them’

By [James Hebert \(/staff/james-hebert/\)](#) 12:04 a.m. Jan. 28, 2010



Aurélia Thierrée stars in “Aurélia’s Oratorio,” conceived and directed by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin. — *Richard Haughton*

A kite flies a person, puppets go berserk, a toy train chugs through someone’s belly. All kinds of odd and surprising things happen in the circus-inspired stage happening “Aurelia’s Oratorio” — so why shouldn’t an audience member bark?

In the middle of a phone conversation, Aurelia Thierrée — the central performer in the theater piece named for her — gasps as she recalls an incident that was unusual even for this show, which hits La Jolla Playhouse next week.

“Two nights ago, there was a dog in the audience, a service dog,” she recalls. “It was really unbelievable, because it started wailing (during one illusion). And then when we had the coat fight, it started barking. Its timing was perfect. It was the biggest compliment.”

When Thierrée goes on to muse in her gentle French accent about how it might “be interesting to perform for an audience of animals,” it becomes clear where much of the whimsy behind the “Oratorio” originates.

You could say (go ahead, everyone else already has) that sense of imagination is her birthright: Thierrée is the daughter of Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, who is herself one of the 11 children born to the matchless Charlie Chaplin. (Aurelia’s great-grandfather was the playwright Eugene O’Neill.)

But while her mother (a pioneer of contemporary circus with her husband, Jean-Baptiste Thierrée) directs the show, it’s Aurelia, along with fellow performer Jaime Martinez, who brings the illusions to life. She’s the one who, in what has become perhaps the signature moment of the “Oratorio,” extracts herself limb by limb from a chest of drawers.

She won’t tell you how it’s all done, but she’s only too happy to show you; part of the show’s approach is to let audiences see what’s behind the illusions.

“The tricks are so simple, and handmade, and they can break,” as Thierrée puts it. “Most of the time, you can see how they work.

“But when it really works is when people decide not to see how they work. There’s not big machinery; most of the time you sort of see the strings. It’s very, very simple.”

The “Oratorio” has no dialogue, but it does have music (what Thierrée calls “the backbone” of the piece), and it does have a loose story line. Instead of sharing what that is, though, Thierrée prefers to let audiences spin their own narratives.

“It’s been really interesting to hear what people have to say after they’ve seen the show, because sometimes they have really beautiful stories that could completely fit,” she says. “And I discover things through them. I love listening to them. There are definite themes, that’s for sure. We didn’t start with the themes; we didn’t say, ‘OK, we’re going to have this and that.’ (But) when we were working on the project, suddenly these themes appeared.

“There’s something there. It’s up to you to decide what it is.”

Bark when ready.

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