

Review: 'Aurélia's Oratorio' is effervescent fun

By Pat Craig For the Mercury News

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Berkeley Repertory Theatre takes fierce pride in finding and presenting unusual holiday entertainment.

This year's prize is "Aurélia's Oratorio," a part-vaudeville, part-circus, part-dance, part-comedy created by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin and starring her daughter Aurélia Thierrée. Aurélia cut her theatrical teeth as part of a circus family consisting of her mother; her father, Jean Baptiste Thierrée; and her brother, James. They performed around the world with their own troupes, Cirque Imaginaire and Cirque Invisible.

Don't let the high-flying French titles hold you back. "Aurélia's Oratorio" is an effervescent blend of hilarious innovation and old-fashioned knock-your-socks-off entertainment. The show borrows heavily from vaudeville, burlesque, the circus and much of what you might have seen on Sunday nights on TV during the heyday of eclectic variety shows (OK, "The Ed Sullivan Show").

Aurélia, a willowy, doe-eyed brunette who seems to move effortlessly and without a bone in her body, shares the stage with Jamie Martinez, a slightly built dancer who moves with the same ease. Together they perform in a series of vignettes ranging from silken trapeze work and pure physical comedy to some delightful takes on a classic puppet show in which the puppets are in the audience and Aurélia's head fills the tiny stage.

Many of the bits will seem familiar to anyone who has seen variety acts, where sly humor and outrageous sight gags create no small amount of laughter. Now, as then, success doesn't depend on what performers do but in how well they do it, and how they manage to make the oldest of stunts seem fresh. And this is where the show scores major points — not only is it tremendously well executed, but the various scenes are performed with a tremendous amount of ability and intense engagement with the audience. So they all seem delightfully new.

Aurélia, who is directed in this piece by her mother, is a remarkably gifted performer. She, presumably with the help of Martinez, performs a wildly innovative opening act, mostly from the inside of a tall, three-drawer dresser. At various times, her head may be peeking out from the center drawer, while her leg pokes from one of the top drawers and an arm from the bottom drawer.

As the bit moves along, she produces a pair of high-heeled shoes, a dress, a candle and lighter, a tray of cupcakes and other assorted items, all of which become part of the act until Aurélia emerges from the dresser and dashes madly around the stage, up the side curtains, into the wings and finally emerges from a completely different part of the stage.

In short, this is one of the most unusual and uncanny shows to come along in some time. It works well for the holidays simply because it is suitable and entertaining for all ages, and entertains beautifully on any number of artistic levels.