



RICHARD HAUGHTON La Jolla Playhouse

TOP DRAWER: A chest serves as the launching pad for Aurélia Thierrée's contortionist illusions.

THEATER REVIEW

A dream-like circus fantasy

Tricks Aurélia Thierrée pulls out of her curio cabinet have the audience staring in amazement.

CHARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITIC
REPORTING FROM LA JOLLA

Aurélia Thierrée, the star of "Aurélia's Oratorio," which opened Wednesday at La Jolla Playhouse, perpetrates small-scale acts of stage wonder. Special effects of the Cameron Mackintosh kind have nothing to do with it. This theater artist earns her astonishment the old-fashioned way, through a combination of surreal wit and acrobatic grace.

A daughter of trail-blazing circus performers who are often cited as an inspiration for Cirque du Soleil, Thierrée offers audienc-

es a peek behind the red velvet curtain into the dormant showbiz magic lying in wait for a rambunctious, eternally youthful imagination to activate. The piece, created and directed by Thierrée's mother, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, daughter of Charlie Chaplin, is too topsy-turvy for a straightforward narrative. But there's a meditative quality in the accompanying music that hints at elegy even though the action is always thrillingly cast in the present tense.

The enchantment initially springs from an ordinary dresser. Body parts keep popping out of different drawers in a corporeal jigsaw puzzle that raises the question of just how many hands (and legs) are helping out. The show is, in fact, performed by Thierrée and the supernaturally sinewy Jaime Martinez, but there's backstage support that ingeniously augments illusions.

Given the importance of costumes to this music-hall-inspired production, it makes sense to have a chest of drawers serve as the show's launching pad. Interestingly, garments don human being every bit as much as humans don heels and scarves. Sit and gape as sexy items of red and black clothing take on lives of their own and sumptuous fabrics

spawn unidentifiable creatures by simply billowing.

In this inverted universe, inspired by medieval drawings of upside-down and inside-out worlds, kites fly people, marionettes control the strings and toy trains ride through passengers. This confusion of animate and inanimate realms is the chief engine of surprise. But much of the pleasure derives from the mind-boggling logistics of the presentation. Like a magic show, "Aurélia's Oratorio" challenges audiences to figure out its tricks.

Recommended for children 12 and older, this 70-minute piece, which is closer in rhythm to a dance performance than a circus event, requires some patience and maturity. The artistry on display provokes wide-eyed stares more than cheers, even though the contortionist movement occasionally defies belief. Exhalations of delight are audible throughout.

Hipster parents no doubt will eat it all up, although youngsters prone to nightmares might get spooked by the attack of the puppets. The scene is no more frightening than anything in "Gulliver's Travels," but it's intensely conjured by a crackerjack design team.

"Aurélia's Oratorio" has been on tour for some time (it was Berkeley Rep's recent inspired choice for a holiday show), and its off-beat charms are undeniable. Would-be attendees should approach this curio cabinet of theatrical marvels with an openness to surreal discovery.

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'Aurélia's Oratorio'

Where: La Jolla Playhouse, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive

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

Price: \$45 for adults; \$25 for youths 17 and younger

Contact: (858) 550-1010 or www.lajollaplayhouse.org

Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes