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THEATER REVIEW

'Aurelia's Oratorio'

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A touch of magic, the legacy of the circus, childhood whimsy and the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin all combine to form the unusual "Aurelia's Oratorio" at UCLA's Freud Playhouse. It's an evening that lacks an obvious story or headline but showcases the considerable physical talents of Aurelia Thierrée, Chaplin's big-eyed descendant, who climbs curtains, dangles by her ankles from scary heights and creates scene after scene of gentle irony, ably assisted by Broadway dancer Julio Monge.

Under the direction of her mother, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, who created the show for her, Thierrée hurls herself into physical jokes, many based on a simple (though not simply executed) reversal of the familiar. In the show's opening moments, legs, feet and fingers pop out from the drawers of a chest, playing peekaboo with the audience. No words are spoken.

In another, Thierrée takes flight above the stage, tethered to a kite that appears to be flying *her*. When two people bearing a litter arrive and the passenger seat appears to be upside down, she boards it sitting upside down and is carried off in this gravity-defying posture.

The show's charm derives from such amusing and artfully staged illusions pieced together in a desultory procession that appears to be going nowhere in particular except from one childish or surreal notion to the next, scored with recorded jazz, electronic music and percussion.

Monge, a taut and mutable presence, suavely delivers clownish sketches in which he manages to animate a hand-held coat and trousers with the illusion that another man is inside. Thierrée and Monge together inhabit a pair of pants and a jacket, forming a cartoon-like creature that vaults into the air.

Throughout, Thierrée impresses with an athleticism that seems surprising when coupled with her fine-featured face and the eyes of a 1920s screen siren. Her pale and lovely countenance seems to have been peeled from a vintage poster.

Meanwhile, she muscles up the scenery rigging like a Marine and flies through the air like an acrobat, then returns to the stage for a comedic or poignant vignette with oversized puppets and props.

It is quite a display of something that is even hard to describe. She is not so much playing a single character or characters but a woman intoxicated by wild dreams who also has the ability to act them out with *élan* and circus training.

In one of the evening's most striking scenes of turning the world on its head, her luminous eyes and cheeks fill the frame of a miniature proscenium as she entertains an audience of humorously designed puppets seated before her.

The knowledge that she is Chaplin's granddaughter is both fitting and possibly a distraction as one searches her face and movement for traces of the great silent film comedian.

It is too easy to say that she comes by her physical grace and wordless comedic flair naturally but worth noting that she began performing at 4 in the *Cirque Imaginaire*, created in Europe by her parents, Victoria and Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, whose "new circus" ideas influenced, among others, *Cirque du Soleil*.

"Aurelia's Oratorio," which might be rated G if theater had such ratings, has its share of circus tricks but with a cast of two (five if you count some walk-ons) doesn't attempt spectacle, preferring the intimate encounter, the duet, the mimed interior monologue. Near the end of the show, Thierrée becomes an hourglass with her body's sandy essence running out the bottom.

Another nifty illusion has her magically reconstituting her body and clothing so a hole appears in her midriff just large enough for a model train to pass through after she fuses herself to the model train's track. (Ever tried that at home?) It doesn't mean anything, and yet the sight of the train's headlight chugging through her "tunnel" is an image you won't likely soon forget.

This is theater as child's play but engineered with the ingenuity and skill of adults. What fun.

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