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Puppets gather to watch a human perform on a tiny Punch-and-Judy stage. A kite flies a woman. A face fans a fan. Arms turn into legs and at times there's no telling which end of a person is up.

Reversals of expectations are the order of the day in "Aurélia's Oratorio," the delightfully surreal dreamscape of a show that opened Wednesday at Berkeley Repertory's Roda Theatre. Part nouvelle circus, part vaudeville of illusions, part fantastical free association, "Oratorio" is a whimsical showcase for the talents of Aurélia Thierrée, a performer who practically defines the word beguiling. Which is as it should be. "Oratorio," which Thierrée and versatile dancer Jaime Martinez have been performing widely since 2003, was conceived, directed and designed by the person who conceived its star - her mother, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin. Yes, that's Chaplin as in the genius who set the gold standard for film comedy. His daughter Victoria and her husband, Jean Baptiste Thierrée, virtually invented a new form of small, performer-centered circus in France in the early '70s, often cited as an inspiration for Cirque du Soleil. From the evidence of "Oratorio," she's inherited a great deal of her father's talent for framing comic routines without overselling them (if not the dramatic density of her maternal grandfather, Eugene O'Neill).

Aurélia Thierrée, who grew up in their circuses, has much of her grandfather's innate performance charisma and a charm all her own. From the moment she makes her first appearance - one possibly disconnected hand, foot or leg at a time - she has the audience at her intricately inventive mercy.

One routine follows another in a kind of dreamworld between sleep and waking. There's no story, except that Martinez, who may be another figment of her imagination, seems to be trying to connect with or rescue Thierrée all through the fragmented hallucinations that have her getting swallowed up in curtains, dismembered by shadow puppets, dangling in swaths of fabric high above the stage or disintegrating like grains of sand in an hourglass.

Quick sight gags alternate with more extended floor or aerial tangos and other routines, staged by Thierrée Chaplin in red-and-black or black-and-white visions to a recorded soundtrack that ranges from music-box simplicity or orchestral grandeur to a "freak show" song by the iconoclastic Tiger Lilies (with whom Thierrée has performed). A lacy snow scene is a particular highlight. At a mere 70 minutes long, "Oratorio" is packed with enough delights for a show twice as long. It may not have been designed specifically for the holidays, but it's like a Christmas stocking stuffed with one gift after another.