



September 24, 2010

# Circus Magic, With Legendary Undertones

By ANITA GATES

If you look carefully at the program for “Aurélia’s Oratorio,” you will see the name Chaplin. (It’s part of the director’s name.) If you see “Aurélia’s Oratorio,” now at the [McCarter Theater Center](#), without having read the program that carefully, you may be too busy smiling and laughing appreciatively to think about anybody’s family background.

Aurélia is Aurélia Thierrée, the show’s star, and the first parts of her to be seen are a hand and a foot. They and their mates peek out, one at a time and eventually in impossible combinations, from a simple chest of drawers sitting center stage. When all of Ms. Thierrée emerges, she makes an indelible first impression: This is a beautiful woman.

But beauty is almost irrelevant in this consistently entertaining, sometimes transcendent one-act show, a 70-minute, basically plotless conglomeration of fantasy, topsy-turvy surrealism and illusion. Ms. Thierrée wears a scarf that soon becomes the size of the theater’s red curtain and at one point turns into a hammock. She is concerned when her pet mouse drags in a dead cat. She carries a tower of groceries while rolling an empty cart. A tall, curvy vase sitting on a table turns upside down to become some creature’s delightfully silly face and hat.

An alarm clock goes off, so it’s time to go to sleep. A kite flies a person. A dog-size monster chomps off Ms. Thierrée’s left leg, but she promptly knits herself a new one, in situ. (On the night I saw the show, that piece of quick thinking and action received, and deserved, spontaneous applause.) A larger monster captures and carries her as if he were King Kong and she [Fay Wray](#). An adorable audience of little puppets sits and watches a performance at a Punch-and-Judy-style theater; the star is a human.

“Aurélia’s Oratorio,” in which the star is ably assisted by Jaime Martinez, is something like a very intimate [Cirque du Soleil](#), part magic show, part silent comedy. So it is of definite interest that Ms. Thierrée, 39, is the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin. Her mother, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin (having reversed her maiden and married surnames), the show’s director and creator, is the daughter of Chaplin and the former Oona O’Neill. That makes Aurélia Thierrée, our star, also the great-granddaughter of [Eugene O’Neill](#). So if she has an effortlessly commanding stage presence, a wisely absurdist worldview and flawless comic timing, it should be no surprise.

But what is this show, which has been touring for years, doing at the McCarter? Audiences at Princeton's distinguished theater are more accustomed to seeing the works of Chekhov, Molière, Shakespeare or Shaw — or noted contemporary playwrights like David Mamet or Edward Albee — onstage. Emily Mann, the McCarter's artistic director, characterizes the show as a special event, and let's hope it is. Otherwise it could be a sign of an unfortunate trend.

Observers of New York theater lament the lack of originality in shows based on Disney movies or cartoons, like "Mary Poppins" and "The Addams Family." But at least those shows have characters, settings and plots.

When people go to see "Blue Man Group" or "The Flying Karamazov Brothers" (both in current Off Broadway theater listings) or "Aurélia's Oratorio" and believe they have enjoyed an evening of theater, what possible future can the real thing have? Some argue that novelty-act productions help introduce nontheatergoers to a new world. In fact, they're more likely just to blur an important distinction, the one between spectacle and real theater.

*"Aurélia's Oratorio," created and directed by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, is at the Berlind Theater, McCarter Theater Center, 91 University Place, Princeton, through Oct. 17. Information: (609) 258-2787 or [mccarter.org](http://mccarter.org).*