



## FIRSTNIGHT

# The circus of dreams goes out on a limb

## Theatre

### Aurélia's Oratorio

Lyric, Hammersmith, W6

★★★★☆

DONALD HUTERA

NOTHING beats a great entrance in the theatre except, perhaps, a fabulous finish. Aurélia Thierrée, the centre-piece of this charming stream of proscenium arch illusions, is lucky — she gets both.

The show which bears Aurélia's name was devised, directed and designed by her mother, Victoria Thierrée Chaplin. Yes, as in Charlie. Victoria, his daughter, found her own fame, along with her husband Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, as a pioneer of the hybrid "new circus" movement. For decades the couple toured the globe conjuring theatrical magic via *Le Cirque Invisible* and *Le Cirque Imaginaire*. Their offspring, Aurélia and James, cut their teeth in those productions.

Plainly talent runs in this family. More recently the grown-up James has scored international hits of his own with *The Junebug Symphony* and *La Veillée des Abysses*. The *Oratorio* is his sister's attempt to do likewise.

The build-up to our first full-length view of Aurélia has a sneaky comic elegance. Initially we see her in sections — a hand holding a cigarette, a long shapely leg. These disembodied appendages slip out of, and back into, the drawers of a large chest in a manner that defies normal human anatomy. Impeccably timed, this opening sequence is a superbly light metaphor for the compartmentalisation of modern identity.

The remainder of the 75-minute performance is laced with surreal surprises, throw-away sight gags and topsy-turvy transformations alluding to theatrical and daily life. With her thin frame, wispy fair hair, big intense eyes and beguiling

smile, Aurélia is well cast as a gently beleaguered heroine. Her character seems both dotty and doughty. In one of several reversals of expectation she is happily airborne, being flown by a kite. The red velvet curtains framing the stage periodically go wonky. One of Aurélia's independent-minded arms climbs up a fold until she, standing centre stage, calls it back to its rightful place.

In the show's eeriest scene she is subdued by puppets and dragged unconscious off stage. Even more alarmingly, she is reduced to ashes that sift through the funnel-like bodice of a beautiful gold dress.

The supporting cast consists of three women whose most vital job is the many unseen string-pullings that make the show's tricks take flight. Timothy Harling is more of a featured player, his recurrent task to wrestle or dance with various empty coats and robes that seem to have wills of their own.

The show, a balance of dreams and domesticity, exudes a particularly feminine creative perfume.

The staging is fluid, sensual and stylish, even if the joins are sometimes visible and it lacks narrative drive. The sweet-natured absurdities could cast a greater spell. I won't spoil the ending but it is sublime.

Box office: 08700 500511.  
Oxford Playhouse (April 22-24),  
Gardner Arts Centre, Brighton  
(May 25-28), Malvern (June 1-2)

Fluid, sensual and stylish: Aurélia Thierrée, the granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin, and Timothy Harling perform in the surreal *Aurélia's Oratorio*, which is running at The Lyric in Hammersmith, West London, until April 16