

AURELIA'S ORATORIO

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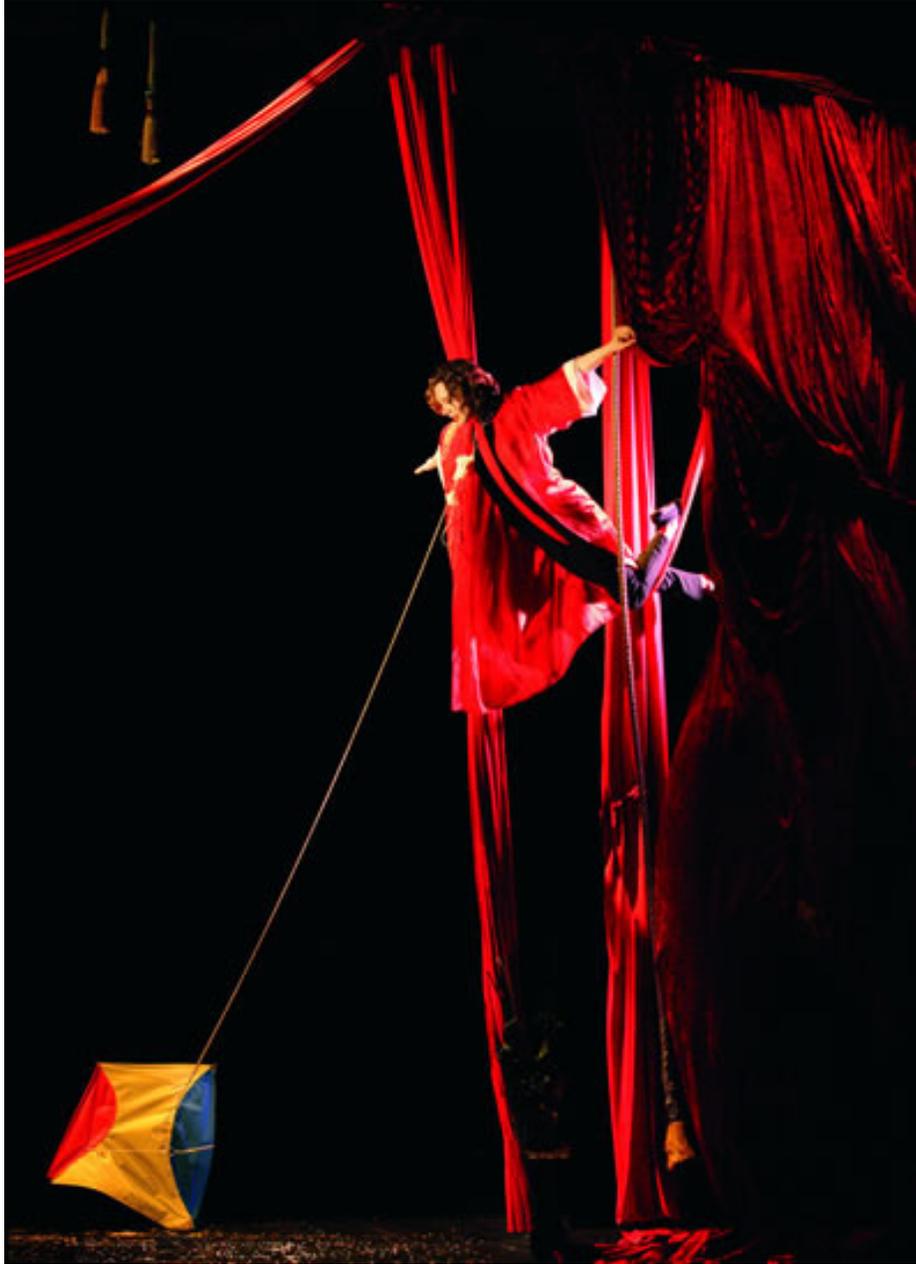
Our Cultural Attache and Island-Life Event Coordinator juggled tix while working Xmas, Xmas Eve, NYE, and New Years Day at the Crisis Clinic, but managed to get us over to see Berkeley Rep's latest offering on the Roda stage, Aurelia's Oratorio. (All photography by Richard Haughton).



The lights go down, an ostensible telephone conversation in French is heard, the subtext of which is a dispute between a man and a woman. Lights come up and a basic chest of drawers occupies center stage. A drawer opens, a hand emerges, then retreats. For the next ten minutes, various drawers open and close, arms and legs appear, a woman appears to be getting dressed in a black dress and red shoes inside the chest, while also noshing on a plate of pastry, lighting a candle with matches by feel, and drinking a glass of red wine.

Not for a good eight minutes does the head of the charming Victoria Thierree Chaplin emerge and it takes another five minutes for her to pop up, and toss first one leg, then another leg, then improbably yet another leg over the edge of the bureau and finally step out on stage.

For the next sixty minutes, the natural world as we know it upends itself as kites fly people through the air, draperies chase one another and embrace, occasionally swallowing up performers as they climb, taxi's arrive and depart with their fares upside down and a man dances with empty garments that flirt, cavort and -- on one memorable moment -- beat him up before carrying him off stage.



A woman asks the time of a shadow that is casting out the form of a live person on the stage, sets her alarm, and when it goes off, goes to sleep.

She dreams of flying and of hanging out her clothes to be watered and of a man who runs this way and that (performed by an impish Jaime Martinez) calling out the name "Aurelia!" It seems he wants to own and control this woman, leading a wild jerky dance at first, then trying to dress her in costumes after

finding only empty dresses and cloaks to dance with. She cannot be controlled or owned; she is elusive, aquatic, arboreal, aerial, and magical.

She also wishes for some maintenance over this world, but as she swings high above the stage, the entire structure shakes, falls to pieces. The very structure of the world falls apart as the curtain frames collapse, forcing her back to the earth.



She tries to control Time in the end, by manipulating clocks to play a tune, but she is turned herself into the symbol of time's passage, when she finds herself dissolving through an hourglass into a pile of sand.

Anguished, the man sweeps up the sand and pours it into an empty dress, but lacking magic, he tosses the dress into a pile of clothes.

From which the woman magically emerges, startling the man, who runs off.

The final piece of this largely wordless "Oratorio" shows the man carrying a lantern and a timepiece, beckoning the woman to follow. She refuses and he exits. She then enters an oval train track, opening a door in her midsection, relays a section of the track so that it seems to pass through her body, and so becomes a portal for the train as it circles about the track and the lights fade.

An "Oratorio" was a piece of music for orchestra, choir and solo singers. It usually told a story from the Old Testament and stems from about the 18th Century in Europe. Unlike conventional opera, an oratorio was sung, not acted, performed usually in the religious setting of a church or a concert hall, and always done in the common language of the composer, instead of high Italian. The most famous oratorio, probably, is Handel's Messiah.

There is quite a lot of music in Chaplin's piece here, which was performed by Aurelia Thierree and directed and conceived by her mother, who is herself quite a piece of work.

Briefly, Victoria Thierree Chaplin is the daughter of actor/comedian Charlie Chaplin and Oona O'Neill Chaplin, and the granddaughter of playwright Eugene

O'Neill. Although born in Santa Monica California, the family moved soon after her birth to Switzerland. Together with her husband, Jean Baptiste Thierree, she created a new style of theatre which is generally credited with being the inspiration, if not the very foundation for Cirque du Soleil.

What American audiences see here is an heavily European-inflected set of performances with evocations of circus, vaudeville and the commedia del'arte physicality that Rep audiences have come to experience more and more by way of Les Waters' creative direction. This is very physically demanding theatre requiring split-second timing and the willingness and training to dangle head-down thirty feet above the stage -- among other things -- while making it all appear simply delightful.

It is theatre as Magical World, a world which we are invited to view, but not allowed entirely to enter, for this kind of thing specifies Fourth Wall distance. There is an almost Brechtian detachment of foreign regard in this kind of theatre, which can only be executed by properly trained individuals who, quite frankly, are not like you and me. For all that, the creation of this virtual world of magical upside-down is charming and heartening in that the understanding impossibility has its limits has a way of setting us free.

One could spend endless hours and words analyzing what it all means, which is a great strength of the production, which Victoria claims is only meant to entertain. Well, one can be entertained by a strip show, a football game, or something engaging like this.

Besides, long time Island-lifers know we have a thing about trains, which provide the evocative closing images and sounds to the Oratorio. "*Einsteigen! Tueren schliessen! Vorsicht beim Abfahrt!*"

Who's Who

Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, Director / Conception
Gerd Walter, Technical Direction / Stage Manager
Roberto Riegert, Lighting Technician
Nicholas Lazzaro, Sound Technician
Tamara Prieto Arroyo, Backstage Support
Antonia Paradiso, Backstage Support
Monika Schwarzl, Backstage Support / Costumes
Laura de Bernadis, Lighting Design
Philippe Lacombe, Lighting Design
Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, Sound Design / Stage Design / Costumes
Jacques Perdiguez, Costumes
Veronique Grand, Costumes
Didier Bendel, Company Management / Administration
Richard Haughton, Photography
La Compagnie du Hanne-ton, Collaborator
Théâtre L'Avant-Scène, Co-Producer
La Ferme du Buisson Cognac / René Marion, Co-Producer
ArKtype / Thomas O. Kriegsmann, Executive Producer–US Tour

Cast

Aurélia Thierrée
Jaime Martinez

(The two "Chinese Conveyors" are not credited)