

THEATER

# Stage Notes: Aurélia Thiérrée and *Murmurs*

by Adam Green



Photo: Courtesy of Aurelia Thierree

My father's hero was Charlie Chaplin—his idolization bordered on worship—and that reverence was passed along to me as a little boy by way of a steady diet of Chaplin's films (I even used to dress as him on Halloween). To my father's joy, he got to know Chaplin later in the great comedian's life, and they became good friends. One of Chaplin's daughters, **Victoria**, apparently had a schoolgirl crush on my father, which she confessed to him years later, when he and I went to see her and her husband **Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée's** *Le Cirque Invisible*, a poetic and delightfully small-scale re-imagining of

the circus arts that is widely credited as having spawned the neo-circus movement that eventually led to Cirque du Soleil. About ten years ago at a *New Yorker* party—this is going somewhere, I promise—**Lillian Ross**, who had gotten to know Chaplin and his family when she wrote about him for the magazine, introduced me to his granddaughter—Victoria’s daughter—**Aurélia Thiérrée**, a pale, phosphorescent beauty who has followed in the family’s nimble footsteps as a performer, and we’ve been friends ever since.

I tell you all of this to disclose that I brought more than just my critical eye to the opening night of *Murmurs*, the enchanting and hallucinatory theater piece starring Aurélia, conceived and directed by her mother, that played at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater as part of the Lincoln Center Festival this past weekend. After having toured England, Israel, Spain, Germany, and Russia (“a terrifying country”), Aurélia will stay put in New York for a brief spell this summer before she heads for Austria and Belarus in the fall. A potent blend of theater, dance, pantomime, acrobatics, puppetry, and illusion, *Murmurs* has the seductive but unsettling aura of a dream. The lights come up on Aurélia, wearing a kimono and red stilettos, sitting alone on a stage littered with cardboard boxes and sheets of plastic, a faraway look in her wide eyes as she pops bubble wrap. Apparently, she is packing away her worldly belongings, and when a vase proves too big for one of the boxes, she picks up a hammer and smashes it into pieces to make it fit. She lights up a cigarette, inhales, and blows the smoke out of her ears. Then a tangle of bubble wrap comes to life and transforms into a huge creature—to me, it looked like a dog—playfully caressing her with its paws until its grasp becomes more menacing. With an expressive face that would have been at home in silent movies, Aurélia resembles less her grandfather’s iconic Little Tramp than one of his on-screen love interests, and her persona is more quicksilver and enigmatic than hapless and plucky But Chaplin’s spirit still hovers, and that’s not a bad thing.

The narrative, such as it is, involves a quest for something—home, solidity, permanence, a coherent experience of reality—that, as in a dream, continually disappears, falls apart, melts away, and otherwise remains elusive. Along the way, Aurélia is pursued by the splendid slapstick clown **Magnus Jakobsson**, who seems to want to save her, and dances several beautiful duets with the sinuously exuberant **Jaime Martinez**, most memorably on top of a table twinkling with lights from which she skitters to hover magically in mid-air. She also disappears into boxes only to emerge from others, dives in and out of windows, shimmies up buildings, does an aerial ballet on a clothesline, miraculously climbs a tower of teetering crates to retrieve a lightbulb that, even after she unscrews it, remains lit, and takes her curtain call with her real-life cat who, to the audience’s delight, appears out of nowhere in the final moments of the show.

“Elliot was fantastic tonight—one of his best performances,” Aurélia tells me over dinner after the performance. “Sometimes he just stands there or wanders away, but tonight he was very lively.”

Aurélia made her stage debut as a little girl, alongside her brother James (another extraordinarily gifted physical performer) in their parents' circus, first in a box and then in a suitcase from which only her legs emerged. "It's a theme that seems to keep coming back," she says. After a peripatetic childhood, she briefly quit performing to stay put and finish an entire year at the same school, while her family continued to tour. "I wanted to have a normal existence," she says. "That was my rebellion, my big adventure. I'm so lame."



Photo: © Richard Haughton

*Murmurs* is her second collaboration with her mother ("It's where we get along best, actually—outside, like with all mothers and daughters, it can be complicated."). Their first show, the lauded Aurélia's *Oratorio*, with which she toured the world for seven years, saw her swinging from red velvet curtains, having her limbs appear at impossible angles from a set of drawers, and standing center stage while a toy train chugged through her torso. Its success, she says, took her by surprise, and she resisted the pressure to replicate it. "You want to do something completely different," she says. "I think that the times call for something darker right now. This one, when we started working on it was very, very dark. It seemed like I was getting attacked and killed every ten minutes in the

show, and I started to wonder, What's my mother trying to tell me? It was all about finding, somewhere in all these dark things, moments of light."

I've been friends with Aurélia long enough to know to not bring up such déclassé topics as what the show "means" or what its narrative is about. "People often ask what the story of the show is, and to be truthful there are some nights when I don't know," she says. "I would only say that it's about finding yourself displaced from everything that is familiar, and that's all you need to know. The most interesting thing for me is different people's interpretation of it, like in psychology when they show you a shape and ask what you see. If the show survives in someone's imagination and morphs into something else, then we've done our job. Oh, and of course it must be entertaining—that's number one."

Over the years, she has appeared in small roles in several of **Milos Forman's** films, among others, but she's not interested in pursuing a career in Hollywood. As for television, shortly after *The Artist* won the Best Picture Oscar, she was approached by a production company to see if she was interested in doing a reality series in which she would interact with the real world entirely in pantomime. She wasn't.

As the evening goes on, the discussion turns to the many connections between our families, and we talk for a while about her late Uncle Sydney, Chaplin's son by his first wife—an improbably handsome man with a genius for obscene humor who had been my father's best man when he married my mother. I tell her about the time he and my father were out for dinner with a boisterous group and a man from a nearby table came over and said, "Could you please not use so much profanity. I'm here with my wife." To which Sydney, pointing to his own wife, replied, "What does this look like—a pile of shit?" We also talk about **Gloria Vanderbilt**, her grandmother Oona's lifelong friend, who had come to Aurélia's dressing room earlier that night looking, at 87, astonishingly youthful in wedge sandals, her toenails painted candy blue. Suddenly, I remember that, for my bar mitzvah, Vanderbilt and her husband had given me a collage made up of mementos from my childhood supplied by my parents. One of them was a picture of me from a long ago Halloween dressed as the Little Tramp, complete with derby, cane, and a smudge of burned cork under my nose.



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