

# James Thierree, Raoul, Barbican Theatre

- Performer/company: [James Thierree](#)
- Production: [Raoul](#)
- Venue: [Barbican Theatre](#)

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Performance: 13 - 24 Oct 09

Reviewed: 13 October.

Showman, acrobat, illusionist, aerial artist, contortionist, dancer; and these are not all the expert skill sets at the personal disposal of 35 year-old **James Thiérrée**. He was – literally – born to perform; the son of **Victoria Chaplin** and **Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée**, co-creators of **Le Cirques Bonjour, Imaginaire** and **Invisible** (this latter being reprised at the South Bank last August). One might add that James Thiérrée is also the grandson of **Charlie Chaplin** and the strength of Chaplin's idiosyncratic, purely visual and physical humour has clearly passed undiminished through the genes. Thiérrée's film debut was as Ariel in **Peter Greenaway's Prospero's Books**, a reference of relevance here because I found myself regularly thinking of **Michael Nyman's** music whilst listening to **Thomas Delot's** impactful soundscape for *Raoul*; and there was much in the structure and content of this work that possessed similar visual hallmarks with Greenaway's films.



*Raoul* is a thrilling explosion of surreal confetti, a perpetual scattering of visual trickery and dynamic movement that seems impossible to fully absorb, but the audience quickly attunes to the constancy of surprise. The work is billed as a solo but other uncredited bodies are involved; bodies with which Thiérrée can change places in many unexpected circumstances. He hides in an upturned oil drum, only to reappear elsewhere, moments later and at one point he appears to be beamed – StarTrek style – from centre stage to appear - within seconds - flying across the stage on a wire.

Thiérrée claims not to be a dancer and yet he has the most incredible close control of his body, creating exceptional and mesmerising movement: one solo concentrating on just overlapping, flowing hand actions was quite beautiful. His ability to mimic slow motion capture of movement is also used to great effect, not the least in a scene where he boxes himself, ending with a knock-out sequence that could find a place in boxing's hall of fame.

Notwithstanding this towering central dynamo, *Raoul* could never work without the extensive complications of its intricate set and props. It begins in a scene reminiscent of the wreck of a tall-masted ship, sails broken and disordered. They are swiftly re-arranged into a surround setting for a kind of building roughly constructed from what appeared to be scaffolding poles (I was firmly convinced that it was some sort of hut for polar explorers, an image reinforced by the appearance of a man in exploration clothing completed by a miner's helmet with torch). Throughout the work the set re-arranged itself at the touch of an offstage button with props and scaffolding poles flying through the air to be tidied away. Thiérrée was joined by the occasional life-sized fabric animal (all made by his mother, Victoria): a giant flat fish, a very large elephant, a skeletal bird and a metallic bug; and an old-fashioned, 20' high wooden ladder served as the basis for a remarkable, gymnastic display by Thiérrée that was equal to any demonstration piece by an Olympic athlete. Then, at the very end of the 75 minute work, an extraordinary "Victorian" contraption (which seemed to have jumped from the page of an **H.G.Wells** novel) was employed to enable the attached Thiérrée to fly out over the front stalls and twist and turn in huge arcs around the stage.

As a piece of physical theatre, I haven't much idea about what *Raoul* was all about, save to say that Thiérrée seemed to be both the insider (a quiet man at home within the explorer's hut listening to crackly 78 rpms on his old-fashioned gramophone) and the outsider trying to break this cosy environment down. There may have been some grander message that has escaped me but who cares! This was physical theatre at its very best performed by an extraordinary man at the very height of his multi-faceted powers.

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