

Junebug

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Hammersmith Lyric Theatre

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Durrants

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Circus The Junebug Symphony

Lyric, Hammersmith

★★★★☆

IT'S THE sort of night with which you'll probably be all too familiar.

The bed tilts until you're hanging sideways off it. A hand appears from nowhere and scratches you. Your arms and feet fall off and get swept beneath the bed. Your pillow disappears, then gets stuck to your face. Smoke covers you and the bed. Sleeplessness becomes restlessness becomes a dream in which everything from gravity to biology goes alarmingly askew.

It's also the opening to *The Junebug Symphony*, a surreal circus staged and largely performed by James Thiérree, who started his career as a tot in *Le Cirque Imaginaire*. That was the creation of his parents, Jean-Baptiste Thiérree and Victoria Chaplin — Charlie's daughter since you ask — and was notable for a

quaint simplicity. I saw it more than once, and recall tightrope-walking a few feet off the ground and tricks, not with elephants and tigers, but with geese and ducks. Thiérree and Chaplin provided the hints: you did the imagining.

Their son's circus is more sophisticated. Indeed, I'd recommend it almost more to adults than to children. But it certainly hasn't sacrificed freshness and fun. Thiérree plunges you into a world where the ground may start going backwards, you have to triple-somersault to get into an armchair, your mirror image picks a fight with you, a hairy Stone Age man materialises in a sedate 18th-century painting, a 1920s flapper becomes a porcupine, and, whenever you open your wardrobe, you hear music so loud it sends you spinning crazily round the room.

As in old-style circuses there's a bit of contortionism and a little trapeze; but since Raphaëlle Boitel, who is mainly in control of this side of things, is a sort of human snake who gets intimately involved with a chandelier, this

isn't conventional stuff either. After all, here's an evening in which a singer's skirts suddenly open to reveal a man playing a harmonium inside and a clarinettist behind her. It has a madcap quality lacking in, say, the *Cirque du Soleil's* grandiose fantasies.

Can you accuse it of succumbing to circus's industrial disease, cuteness? No, even an elaborate scene involving a comical door with no clear outside or inside has its aggressive biff-on-the-nose moments.

And the last and best episode starts with what appears to be a banquet for a spoof *Mona Lisa* and a parody *Laughing Cavalier* and ends with the butler turned into a blend of samurai and rhino, a warrior who greets his clawed enemy with forks, trays and spoons and is undaunted by the peacock-feather arrows whizzing down from the wings. If only all my nightmares were as imaginative as this, I'd be happy to have one every night.

Benedict Nightingale

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