

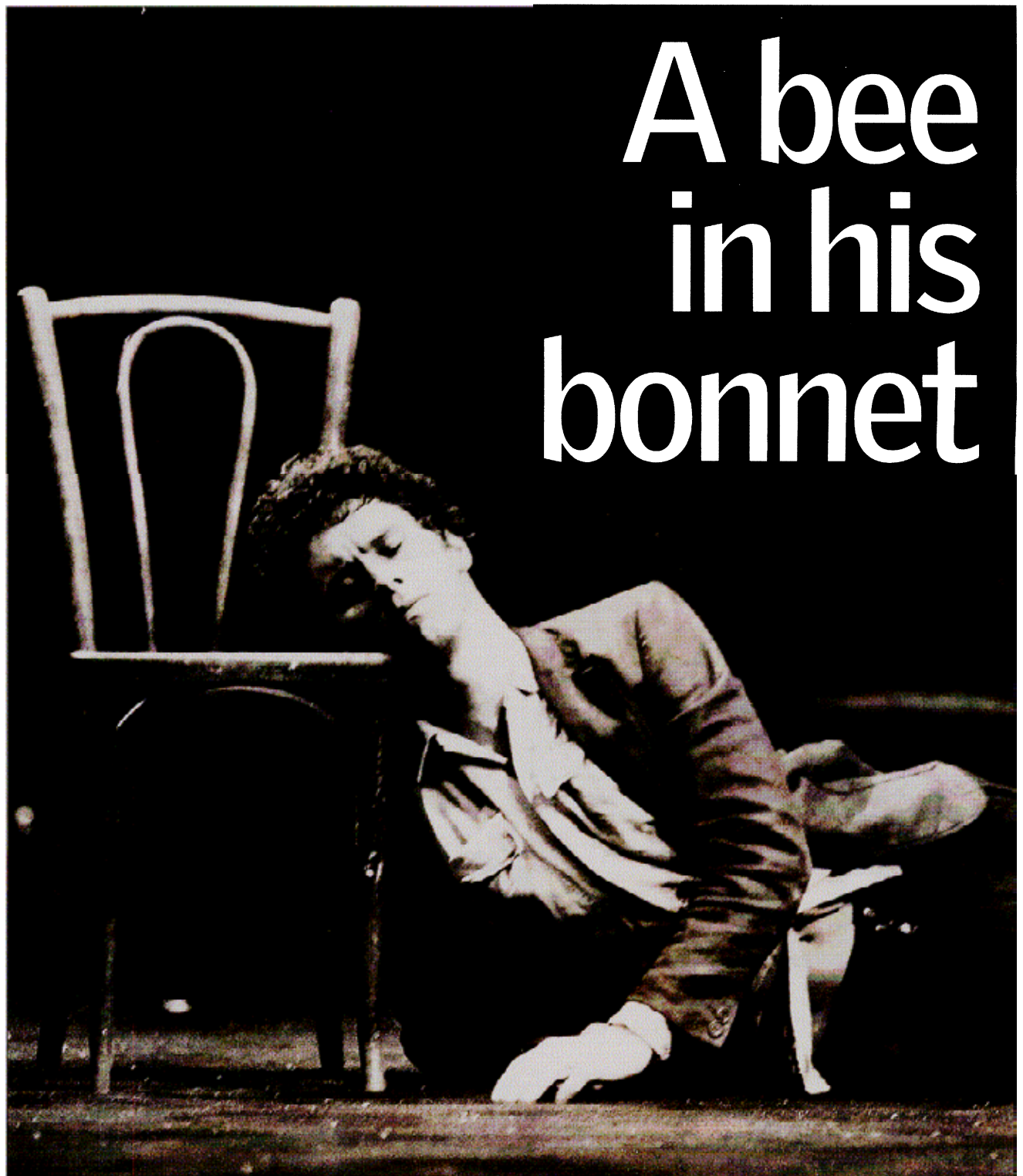


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A bee in his bonnet

A simple wooden chair: it's all James Thierree needs to have his audience gasping with laughter. Pictures: Richard Haughton

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The grandson of Charlie Chaplin breathes new life into the ancient art of circus with *La Veillee des Abysses*, a show that is a hive of activity in more ways than one.

Performing is in James Thierree's blood. He never had to run away to join the circus; the circus ran away with him and he's been borne aloft by its magic ever since.

When he speaks, Thierree's voice reflects softness and strength, balancing qualities that determine the split-second difference between triumph and disaster in a room full of paying customers. They are traits that stem from a lifetime of training and a pedigree from which he can never escape.

Thierree is in thrall to the circus, not the circus of mangy tigers and trampled sawdust or the slick conglomerate that is Cirque du Soleil, but circus in its most raw, stripped-down form. This is the circus in which the miraculous elasticity of the human body and death-defying flights of the imagination have come together in performances since the days of full-house signs at the Circus Maximus.

It is a tradition that must have seemed at risk of extinction with the advent of the first mass-media entertainment form of the modern era, motion pictures. Yet one of the greatest movie stars of them all was Charlie Chaplin, the comical little Tramp of the silent era for whom dexterity, timing and voiceless communication to the audience was everything.

Like other legendary silent film comedians such as Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, and generations of clowns before them, Chaplin's genius tapped into a universal circus theme of an average person trying to overcome enormous hurdles to achieve a simple goal. In other words, the essential challenge of life itself.

In 1928, Chaplin even made a film called *The Circus*, in which the Tramp finds himself on a highwire with monkeys ripping off his clothes. "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it," he once said.

His grandson knows that only too well. There, it's out. James Thierree is Charlie Chaplin's grandson, though he never advertises the fact and interviewers are advised against raising the link.

Though he refuses to be defined by the relationship, he has learnt to accept that people will always be curious. Yet as he put it to one inquisitor: "Once they're in the theatre, the audience doesn't give a damn if you're the son of Jesus Christ. They want to see a good

show."

The signs are there, in black-and-white if you like, in his muscle memory. As one reviewer wrote after seeing his latest stage fantasy, *La Veillee des Abysses*, nothing can disguise the same profile, the lightning limbs and the innocent romantic air. The boy has his grandpa's genes in spades.

Thierree was three when Chaplin died in 1977, so he has no memory of the man. As with everyone else, the British-born Hollywood legend was somebody the young James watched in movies.

"My grandfather is an abstract figure," he says. "There are, of course, stories coming from my mother. My grandmother was there after he died. She was there until I was about 14 but she totally closed herself off and was so destroyed by his death that she became a ghost."

Thierree, 31, grew up in a circus founded by his parents, Jean-Baptiste Thierree and Victoria Chaplin. Victoria, the sister of actress Geraldine, was one of eight children of Charlie Chaplin and his last wife, Oona O'Neill, daughter of the playwright Eugene O'Neill.

Disenchanted with mainstream theatre, Jean-Baptiste and Victoria were at the forefront of the counter-culture's embrace of street performing which produced the so-called New Circus movement in the 1970s.

Like Cirque du Soleil, their much more intimate shows, *Le Cirque Bonjour* and *Le Cirque Imaginaire*, redefined circus for a modern audience. Jean-Baptiste and Victoria still perform together and James' sister Aurelia is touring her own show, *Aurelia's Oratorio*.

Thierree started performing with his parents before he was old enough to go to school. In *Le Cirque Imaginaire*, Jean-Baptiste would make his entrance with a suitcase in





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'The audience doesn't give a damn if you're the son of Jesus Christ. They want to see a good show'



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each hand. James was in one and Aurelia in another. When Papa put the suitcases down, each one would appear to grow a pair of little legs and run away.

At times James wanted to run away for good, leaving the peripatetic ways of the circus for a more settled life. He even toyed with the fanciful idea of becoming a lawyer. "You always want what you don't have," he says. "I had dreams of wake-up calls in the morning to go to school and to meet regularly the same people and stay in the same place but they didn't last very long."

At 13, he learnt English at an American school in Paris, partly due to his name, James Spencer Henri Edmond Marcel Thierree. "I told my parents I cannot possibly be named that and not speak English."

Eventually, instead of running away altogether, Thierree began to branch out on his own. At 15 he played Ariel in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* and at 25 he started to devise his own work, first the jubilant *Junebug Symphony* and then *La Veillee des Abysses* with his small troupe, *Compagnie du Hanneton*.

He and his parents are still close. There is talk of another family show and his mother was involved in designing *La Veillee's* decadent costumes.

"My parents are still touring together — they are now in Stockholm — and my sister is touring her own show. Our family talk on the phone and ask each other, 'So, how did it go tonight? How was it for you? How was the audience? Where are you? Oh, Australia, all right'."

Thierree says audiences are different throughout the world. He doesn't have a problem with any language barrier because there is no dialogue in his show but the rhythms, the laughter and the silences from the crowd are different depending on the culture.

Translated as *The Bright Abyss*

but inspired by a book about bees (we will get to that later), *La Veillee des Abysses* is a fusion of contortionism, acrobatics, transformations, music and dance.

Opening in the middle of a storm, the stage reveals five raggedy individuals fighting against a gale of billowing cloth. Thierree — skilled in acrobatics, mime, dance, the trapeze and violin — is joined by opera singer Uma Ysamat, contortionist Raphaëlle Boitel, dancer Niklas Ek and acrobat Thiago Martins.

Transforming everyday objects into chaotic creatures is a strong theme in *La Veillee*. In a surreal domestic tableaux, Thierree and his fellow actors wrestle with chairs and runaway tables, are swamped by a carnivorous sofa and duel with iron gates.

Much as Chaplin did in his silent slapstick routines, Thierree can take a simple wooden chair, twist it, fall from it, and roll his seemingly boneless body around it, until his audience is gasping in pain from laughter. This balletic furniture fight could be a metaphor for the life that we fight against, Thierree says. "It is a bunch of people with a lot of questions about everything. It seems they've lost the memory of how to use a simple chair or how to enter a gate."

While he draws on the raw physical skills of circus, Thierree is more inclined to treat his performance as theatre. But stripped of definition, it is simply about the primal urge to be up close to people and entertain them, he says. "I like to please the audience," he says.

A clue to his style is in the name of his troupe, *Hanneton*. Translated as *Junebug*, it is French for a type of beetle but is commonly understood to mean having a bee in your bonnet or a screw loose.

Thierree wants to give audiences the chance to see reflections of themselves and recognise their own potential to do magic things.

"Circus is the utmost of raw art,

the raw desire of people to sit down and watch other people and be amazed," he says. "Theatre is more about humankind looking at humankind and exploring situations that we put ourselves in — to ask questions and try to answer them."

However, Thierree is determined not to let things get too intellectual by exploring complex ideas or stories, a tendency he suggests has overtaken the most famous New Circus proponents, *Cirque du Soleil*.

"In the end you are just happy to see a very good act in *Cirque du Soleil*. It's dangerous to play around with intellect when you are dealing with the body and when you are on a trapeze and when you are juggling. It's a dangerous game because in the end, you are just juggling and throwing balls around.

"The rawness of circus is hardly avoidable with an art that is simple and direct from the artist to the audience. And when you play with too much arrogance with it, you fall on your arse."

Of course, Thierree has had more than his share of landing on his rump, thankfully mainly confined to rehearsals. Even though he is just in his early 30s, his shows have evolved to accommodate the strain on his body and on his stagemates. One of them, Swedish dancer-choreographer Ek, is in his 60s.

"It is important for me that the show is not glorifying of the young muscled body that we have in our 20s," Thierree says. "It was important for me to get a different range of ages to show that it wasn't about the triumphant youth. It was about the magic of all ages.

"I took away a bit of the oohs and the aahs and the somersaults and the trying to show them how skilful we are. I like to confuse (the audience) more by being closer to them, by giving them the feeling of normality and reality and then the magic is more striking than when it arrives in a more theatrical way."

Eschewing intellectualism but





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working on the basis that you've got to start somewhere, Thierree drew inspiration for this show from *La Vie des Abeilles* (The Life of the Bee), a book by Belgian writer and beekeeper Maurice Maeterlinck that compared the behaviour of bees and humans.

In a series of rehearsals and workshops, the actors improvised routines around some of the book's evocative chapter titles — *The Massacre of the Males*, *The Bridal Flight*, *The Construction of the City*. "I loved the way Maeterlinck looked at the codes and behaviour of bees and figured out the dances they make — the total mystery of it and yet the total structure. As Shakespeare said, it was the stuff

that dreams are made on."

It proved an appropriate source material because it fed neatly into the essence of Thierree's work: well-drilled and apparently random all at the same time.

And this visceral energy is on show without the use of elaborate special effects. "It's real. It's not a movie with computerised imagery. It's flesh and bones and it's a couple of metres away."

Thierree searches for an analogy to explain the thrill of performing and the reason he can never escape from its clutches. Again, he can't help but turn to the legacy of his famous family, mentioning a book his grandmother, Oona, gave him when he was a boy.

Written by another famous relative, Margery Williams Bianco, *The Velveteen Rabbit* is the story of a soft children's toy that becomes more real as it is handled and worn down.

"By wearing down and becoming more real, it is imbued with magic like the circus, and with a hefty bout of exhaustion," Thierree says. "That is totally dependent of the magic and the lightness and the flying. It is not a contradiction. It is about the way we wear down as we conquer our dreams."

La Veillee des Abysses is at the Regal Theatre from February 11-19 as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

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Space walker: James Thierree is inclined to treat his circus art as theatre. Below: Uma Yamat fights a gale of billowing cloth

