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Tabac rouge, Théâtre de la Ville, Paris – review

By Laura Cappelle

The latest production from James Thierrée marks a shift in his trajectory



James Thierrée's 'Tabac rouge'

James Spencer Henry Edmond Marcel Thierrée's full name is roughly as improbable as his life story. The grandson of Charlie Chaplin and great-grandson of Eugene O'Neill, he spent his childhood travelling with his parents, Victoria Chaplin and Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, from circus caravans to stages across the world. From there he went on to launch a wildly successful solo career, with four productions in 15 years.

Tabac rouge is the fifth, and it marks a shift in his trajectory. For the first time, Thierrée isn't on stage; at nearly 40, time has taken its toll on his circus-trained body. Circus itself is also far less prominent in what he calls "a choreodrama"; gone are the high-flying stunts he routinely used in previous productions. Instead, two contortionists are joined by seven dancers and an actor in a sombre production that is haunted by a few more ghosts than usual.

Thierrée is understandably weary of being constantly reminded of his family legacy, but *Tabac rouge* starts in the most Chaplin-esque manner imaginable. As the lights dim, we are introduced to the dancers as an army of ants, as Thierrée describes them, who bear more than a passing resemblance to the factory workers in *Modern Times*, moving nervously, haplessly executing random steps in space. All are excellent in the pliant, virtuosic choreography. Their leader is a blasé "king" played by actor Denis Lavant, who seems uninterested in his busy cohort, leaving a major-domo figure to wave disapproving fingers at dancers and master alike.

There is little order to be found in the king's chaotic world, however. The imposing sets provide a dark,

ominous setting; a jungle of cables and spotlights that spill over the edge of the stage gives way to larger-than-life, fantastical props that slide on and off it. The king has his own armchair on wheels, a desk of enormous proportions and an assistant to stitch back together the documents he tears into pieces. A massive panel made of tangled tubes and oxidised mirrors flips and turns in the centre – an ingenious background for what is alternatively fantasy and nightmare.

Thierrée's poetic brand of theatrical inventiveness is evident in every last detail, but narrative doesn't come quite so easily. There is a story hidden under all the stagecraft: the king's relationship with the group, which dies with him when he has a heart attack. They may even be creatures born only from his imagination, but the structure of *Tabac rouge* is too disjointed to make it clear, with muddled transitions for the characters in the last hour or so. This creation is a cautious step in a new direction for Thierrée; time will tell if he finds the right balance.



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