

CIRCUS ABYSSINIA

Tulu





TULU: SYNOPSIS

- Circus Abyssinia's second creation, *Tulu*, is a family circus show that celebrates the true tale of an icon. Backed by a live band and rocking with the exuberant joy of its cast, *Tulu* tells the story of the first African woman to win Olympic gold.
- The show takes its name from the heroine of the piece: Ethiopian distance runner and Olympic legend, Derartu Tulu. Meaning both 'valley' and 'mountain heights', the name 'Tulu' plays out in the show's dazzling feats of speed and flight, in a runner's pursuit of her horizon, all the way from Ethiopia's Arsi highlands to her Olympic triumph.
- Dancing with flags and flames, invoking the iconic Olympic rings and showcasing Ethiopia's diverse culture, the show emulates the mesmerising and heart-racing thrills of the race that made Derartu a star.

- Derartu runs with the winds of history at her back: the show also pays tribute to the great Ethiopian women and warriors of contemporary and bygone years - usually overlooked by the history books - who came before Derartu and inspired her to run.

- Circus has the power to defy the impossible. Through the superhuman skills of the circus artist, *Tulu* presents Derartu as nothing less than a superhero, one to inspire future generations, especially young women, to march to the beat of their own drum and hold fast to their dreams.

- It is significant that that the starring role is a shared one in the show: every female cast member takes a turn playing Derartu, signifying her legacy as a champion for women's rights and a trailblazer for female athletes and artists who are now following in her footsteps in Ethiopia.



CAST LIST

The Cast

Derartu Tulu: Hanna Tina, Betelhem Dejene, Etsegenet Ashenafi, Semeret Getachew, Helen Shimeles

Fire Jugglers: Bibi Tesfamariam and Bichu Shimellis

Acrobats: Ezera Nigusse, Alemayehu Mulugeta, Befekadu Esmael, Daniel Gezahegn, Behaylu Tesfaye, Dagmawi Fekeru, Cherenet Dereje, Zenebe Fantu.

The Band

Lead Vocals: Nini Aseffa.

Musician (Krar, Waschint) & Backing Vocals: Temesgen Zeleke

Musician (Keyboard, Masinko) & Backing Vocals: Fitsum Minwalkulet



Photo by Andreas Simopoulos (SNF Nostos)



Photo by Waleed Shah

CREATIVE TEAM

Director: Bichu Shimellis

Producers: Bibi Tesfamariam and Bichu Shimellis

Choreographers: Tamerat Ejeta and Bichu Shimellis

Lighting Designer: Mark Whatmough

Costume Designer: Feven Alem



PROLOGUE

A runner's footsteps are heard in the dark, fast and approaching. The blackout gives slowly way to a dim morning light; haze is carpeting the stage. Nothing of spectacle yet, just the steady rhythm of footfall and the measured cadence of breath. The steps are coming closer and closer ...

ACT 1: CONTORTION.

RUNNING GIRL



Photo by David Rubene

The story begins with Derartu Tulu as a young girl, alone in the high hills of Ethiopia's Arsi forest. The dawning light reveals her stretching gracefully center stage.

So begins Tulu's opening act: performed with astounding ease and flexibility, a sinuous solo act of contortion that unfolds from her determination and her dreams.

As the sun rises, the band plays 'Lamo Bora', a song based on an Amharic herding call. Like many children of poverty in Ethiopia, Derartu's duty as a child was to tend the cattle of her village, rising before dawn to herd the animals into the Arsi highlands. But when time was her own, she lived to run.

ACT 2. HAND-VAULTING. *FELLOWSHIP OF RUNNERS*

A group of male runners make their dancing entrance, flanked by two drummers (Bibi and Bichu) who beat time on great timpani, driving the rhythm of a dance based on the musical rituals of Ethiopia's Hamar tribe.

The dance segues into death-defying hand-vaulting stunts, where artists perform feats of human juggling. Derartu runs in and joins them, launching into a lift where she is caught and gleefully thrown high into the air. Derartu creates human towers and is caught in human cradles, performing a series of flips and tumbles that capture the unity and art of teamwork and the shared joys of running together.

But these joys are soon interrupted for Derartu. Offstage, her village is searching for her, shouting her name... duty is calling.



ACT 3. CYR WHEEL.

CIRCLE OF THE RACE

Spinning within a great Roue Cyr, Derartu glides from the shadows, alone again. Her costume evokes a warrior's attire; through a seamless series of spins and pirouettes, she channels the strength, audacity and courage of Ethiopia's female warriors, ferocious throughout history but missing from historical records.

At times spinning like a dropped coin, at others setting her wheel free to roam the stage, the heroine performs her self-discovery with mesmerising intensity and grace. The Cyr articulates Derartu's vow of commitment and surrender to her sport. The shape and direction of the wheel points to the circular nature of the race and the solitary existence of the runner: a reminder that the start and the finish line are the same; the journey matters, not the destination.

The scene closes upon Derartu as she bows inside the wheel. Just as the lights dim, she glances over her shoulder and sees something that terrifies her.

ACT 4. CONTORTION DUET.

BEASTS OF CHASE



Photo by Waleed Shah

A hyena's sinister cackle sounds in the dark. A single spotlight fades up on Derartu's abandoned wheel, revealing two creatures coiled inside. With unnerving grace, two artists in the guise of hyenas begin a disjointed yet beautiful routine, contorting into shapes that express the animal's African folkloric power to shape-shift and harbour a witch's magic.

The scene is a nod to Derartu's real-life encounter with the hyenas who rule and roam the Arsi plains where she trained and raced alone. It explores the dangers she faced and her courage in outrunning them through her wild beloved country. It also suggests how a runner might adopt the qualities of the wild and free creatures of the earth and asks us to imagine how Ethiopia's lands invited Derartu to run.

When the creatures take their bows, Derartu enters at high speed, skating and skirting the space around them. Frightened by her change of pace, they slink offstage, crab-crawling a retreat.

ACT 5. ROLLER-SKATING. *AN ODE TO SPEED I*

As Derartu zips back and forth across the stage, another figure shadows her trajectories, doubling the illusion of superhuman speed. When both artists appear onstage together, whirling and spinning each other about, we see that the second figure's costume evokes Ethiopia's leaders of old: she is an apparition of Derartu's idol, Empress Taytu Betul, who led armies to victory against Italy's invading forces.

Taytu skates after the creatures and another artist enters in her stead. He spins Derartu like a dervish. She flies at heart-stopping speeds by her neck then her ankles, turning topsy-turvy and contorting like a death-defying whirlwind.

The act represents the fruits of her training, her contentious relationship with her coach and the power of her own steely resolve.



Photo by Andreas Simopoulos (SNF Nostos)



ACT 5. ROLLER-SKATING. *AN ODE TO SPEED II*

In a dizzying finale to the roller-skating act, five skaters take to the stage: they are hula-hooping rings in Olympic colours.

The runners circle the stage in formation, pausing upstage to form a tableau of Olympic rings, then dispersing again to fly in a great circle.

The rings interlock and divide as the artists repeat their journey, until finally, the Olympic icon is held aloft and artists in athletic gear burst from upstage to dive through them.

ACT 6. HOOP-DIVING.

OLYMPIC RINGS



Photo by Andreas Simopoulos (SNF Nostos)

The artists dive to signify they have been selected for the Games. Tulu dives with them: Ethiopia has chosen her. An extraordinary hoop-diving act ensues, bursting with feats of speed and precision, flips and arcs and leaps of faith.

The hoop-divers leap through hoops from different directions - feet first, backwards, somersaulting, backflipping, or bent in half, offering a soaring celebration of agility and speed.

For the climax of the piece, an artist enters with a flaming cauldron and Derartu lights the Olympic flame. With the torch she sets the final hoop alight and each artist flings themselves through the circle of flames. Torches are then solemnly held aloft and the Olympic flame is passed around the stage, artist to artist, around the world, in emulation of the iconic torch relay.

ACT 7. TORCH JUGGLING.

OLYMPIC FLAMES

Collecting the torches from artists holding them aloft, Bibi and Bichu perform daredevil feats of fire juggling. Progressing from single, double, to triple passes, they circle each other then juggle back-to-back, upping the ante until nine flaming torches whizz through the air.

A tribute to the flame as a symbol of continuity between the past and present, and between cultures around the world, Bibi and Bichu's fiery juggling captures the elemental magic at work in the flames and colours of Olympic celebration. Their act recalls too the sacred fire ceremonies of Ethiopia's ancient tribes and churches.

At the act's conclusion, Derartu enters and begins a delicate solo dance, wielding her nation's flag as an extension of herself. Other artists join her, brandishing different flags representing different continents; they dance together.



ACT 8. FLAG DANCE.

DANCE OF NATIONS

The flag dancers twirl and step in perfect unison, their performance a nod to the Olympic spirit of world unity. Emulating the Olympic Parade of Nations, this dance of flags unfolds in a series of sweeping arcs and turns, each synchronised dip and swirl fusing balletic movement and percussive stomp, with a choreography inspired by the dances of the Gambo tribe in Southern Ethiopia.

The band performs a song called 'Abet', an Amharic response to when one's name is called. The singer sings in the name of all Ethiopian women; listen to us, they sing, hear our stories and call upon us, we're here and we can do what you do.

A moment of stillness comes as the dancers use their flags to briefly shield the space upstage. Then they let the flags fall to reveal two Icarian tumblers: one standing on the feet of the other and holding Ethiopian flag aloft.



Photo by Andreas Simopoulos (SNF Nostos)

ACT 9. ICARIAN GAMES.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

As the flag dancers lead the parade offstage, the Icarian games begin in earnest: two tumblers perform feats of human foot-juggling in a display of precision timing and sheer acrobatic agility.

Tracing back to the Greek island of Icaria, where athletes of Ancient Greece trained for the original Olympic Games, Icarian Games unfolds in the Olympic spirit of teamwork and pays tribute to the core values of the Games: Excellence, Respect and Friendship.

As the act culminates in a dizzying succession of somersaults, Derartu watches on from the side of the stage. She ties the Ethiopian flag to a rope that unfurls from the roof. As the flag of her country ascends, symbolising her hope of an Ethiopian victory, Derartu gazes up in pride and wonderment.



ACT 10. AERIAL HOOP.

A RUNNER'S SPIRIT

When the Ethiopian flag ascends to the roof, a hoop descends to the floor. A breathtaking aerial duet ensues, in which two performers, Derartu and her mirror image, soar and spin, contorting into shapes that articulate the beauty and grace of the athlete at the pinnacle of her abilities.

This act dilates the quiet seconds before the race, when an athlete steels herself against all outward pressure and gathers her mind to a single-pointed focus upon the run ahead. With each move mirrored and matched by her double, the act is an exploration of Derartu's ambition and her utmost hopes for herself and her country. Hinting at the image of a medal, the hoop represents a window into the pain and joys she faced in pursuit of her dreams.

ACT 11. RUSSIAN SWING.

RACE TO VICTORY

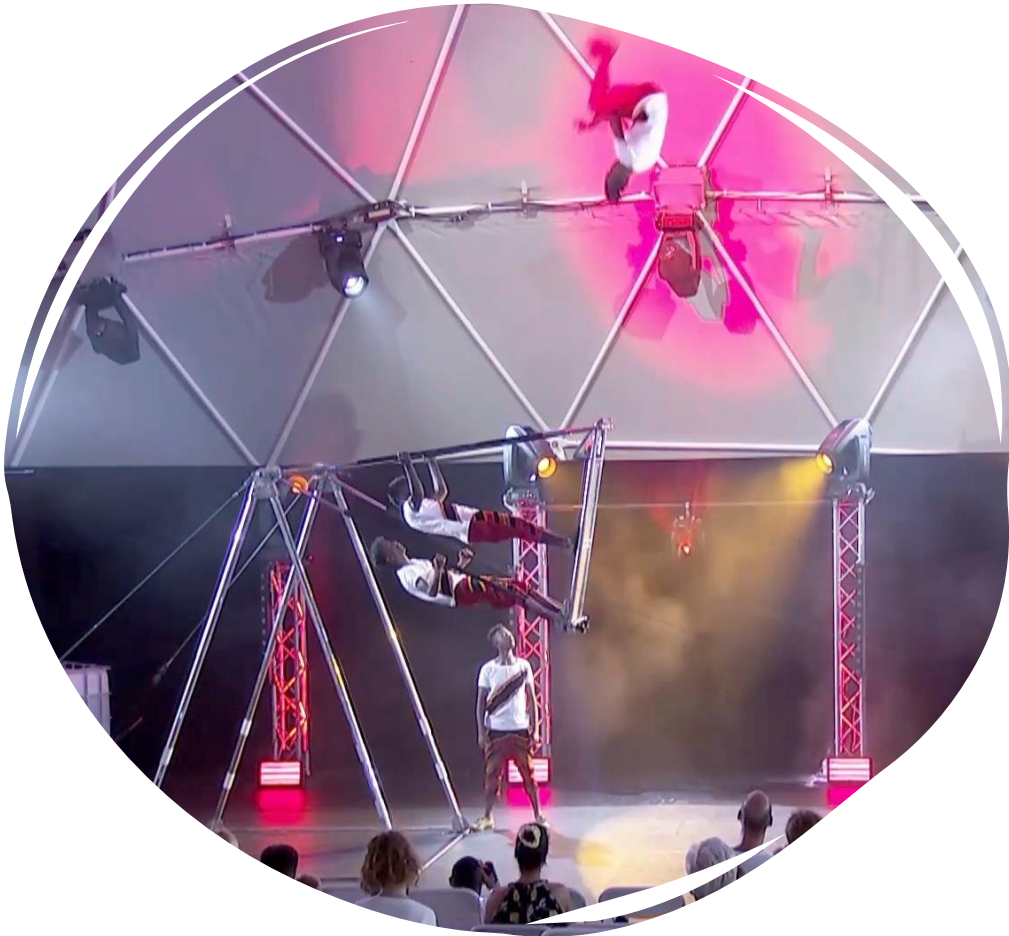


Photo by Andreas Simopoulos (SNF Nostos)

Timpani and bugles signal the beginning of an adrenaline-fuelled finale designed to capture the mesmerising thrills of the 10,000m race when Tulu took gold at the 1992 Olympics.

To the marching rhythms of live drumming, a troupe enters in soldierly formation, pushing a Russian swing onstage like a cannon. The cast engage in a contest of battle poetry, rapping of the battle of Adwa, celebrating Empress Taytu's victory over the armies of fascist Italy. The show crosses timelines of Ethiopian history; the battle and the race, the warrior and the athlete, meet.

The winds of history at her back, Derartu leads the troupe in a tribute to speed and agility as the Russian swing catapults bodies into the air.

Artists tirelessly leap and flip, defying gravity and physics as they somersault at death-defying heights, land on each other's shoulders or plummet to earth, performing a breathtaking contest of one-upmanship in which Derartu outstrips them all.

ACT 12. FINALE DANCE.

TULU'S TRIUMPH

Tulu's pride and happiness fill the entire space, and the show descends into the raucous joys of musical and acrobatic celebration.

With ensemble feats of skipping, cloth-spinning, tumbling and dance, the cast performs a miscellany of acts that encapsulates Derartu's elation and celebrates Ethiopia's triumph. It is a scene that recalls the cheering and waving of flags and banners by people who lined the streets when Tulu returned to Ethiopia's capital after her Olympic victory: the first of many extraordinary triumphs to come and the opening of a door for female athletes and artists to follow.



Photo by Waleed Shah (NYU Abu Dhabi)



SHOW THEMES I

- **SPEED** (and superhuman agility). Through acts of fire, velocity and aerial flight, the show dramatises in Derartu Tulu the makings of a modern-day superhero.
- **WOMEN THROUGHOUT ETHIOPIAN HISTORY** (and the warrior roots of modern Ethiopian women). The show is a tribute to the work and voice of women, from the Queen of Sheba and Empress Taytu Betul to Dr Abebech Gobena and President Sahle-Work Zewde, weaving their tales through Derartu's pursuit of her dreams.
- **SUPERHEROISM & EMPOWERMENT OF YOUNG WOMEN.** The show celebrates not only Derartu Tulu's extraordinary career but how she championed the rights of female athletes and transformed the landscape of women's sport in Ethiopia. The show also seeks to continue her legacy: with very few women on Ethiopia's burgeoning circus scene, the young women in the cast are likewise blazing a trail for the artists of tomorrow.

SHOW THEMES II

- **ETHIOPIAN ICONS.** It's important that the women of the cast take turns playing Derartu and that, throughout the show, Derartu's solitary journey as a runner is attended by apparitions of her icons - women in whose footsteps she follows even as she blazes a path all her own. These figures blur historical timelines and reveal the stakes of her Olympic victory.
- **ETHIOPIAN EXCELLENCE.** The show upholds Ethiopian sovereignty and invites audiences to experience real, contemporary Ethiopia, banishing outdated stereotypes of our culture that persist in the West.
- **NATIONAL & GLOBAL UNITY.** At the show's core is a celebration of the Olympic spirit of world unity and the core values of the Games (excellence, respect, friendship). At a time of national and global divisiveness, the show calls for respect between tribes and cultures and invites us all to embrace our unity even as we acknowledge our differences.





COSTUMES & AESTHETIC

- Fusing fantasy and science fiction with Ethiopian culture, the costumes, artwork and aesthetic of the show draws on Ethiopian comic books and the contemporary Afropunk movement, injecting avant-garde qualities into tribal traditions and reflecting the demographic diversity of Ethiopia.
- Many costumes are inspired by historical figures and embody the theme of the warrior: in the show, acrobats transmute into mythological and historical figures who embody Derartu's own icons: the great Ethiopian women who came before her and who inspired her to run. Through these figures of bravery and strength, the show fuses Olympic ceremony with epic history, with acts that invoke such scenes as the battle of Adwa and Ethiopia's defeat of fascist Italy.



Photo by Tastil Photography

SONGS & MUSIC

- The show immerses the audience in the rhythms, songs and sounds of Derartu Tulu's childhood and the era of her sporting career, from 70s Ethiopian funk and disco to modern Ethio-pop.
- From the music of Hamelmal Abate to Gigi to Seleshe Demassae, *Tulu* rings out with Derartu's favourite songs - songs which also point up the themes and epic subtext of the show and take the audience on a journey through Ethiopia's rich musical landscape.
- Also featuring the original composition and stylings of the Abyssinia band, this musical mix of the old and new is drawn from cultural memory, ritual and tradition, and rocks with the joy of the show's artists and creators.