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Timber! at the Southbank Centre (Queen Elizabeth Hall)

rating:

Rating: strong 4/5

Forget leotards and lithe bodies; they're for sissies. There's a new type of circus in town and it's all about the white vests and bushy beards.

'Timber!', which makes its UK debut here, pays homage to the woodlands and logging traditions of Quebec. It's intentionally rough around the edges and the acts are performed using stuff you might find lying around in a lumberjack's barn, while the performers are huge, muscled and tattooed.

But it's also a testament to family bonds. Cirque Alfonse was founded by Antoine Carabinier-Lépine and his sister Julie. With an appearance from Julie's two-year-old son Arthur, and a role for their 66-year-old father Alain Carabinier, 'Timber!' features three generations of the same family along with Julie's partner Jonathan Casaubon and some childhood friends.

Beginning with a full-throttle food fight, where cabbages are hacked on a large wooden table and potatoes are sliced mid air, it's not long before you begin to think it may be fun, but these guys don't really know what they are doing.

But that's their secret. The company ups the ante imperceptively and dramatically, progressing from fairly simple balancing acts on tree stumps to tightrope walking on a long, thin length of wood held up by two of the performers to juggling with a lot of axes. Before long they're well into a plethora of other death-defying feats.

Amid it all is clowning from the endearing old father Carabinier, some beautiful aerial show displays by the elegant Julie, and a lot of folk songs sung in French with banjos.

The highlight of the night was an astonishingly daredevil act with huge, two-handed saws, the teeth of which were perfectly sharp, as demonstrated earlier when they cut a trunk in half. Antoine transformed himself into a human rotating blade, whereby Casaubon weaved in and out of the many sharp edges with awe-inspiring ease.

By Daisy Bowie-Sell