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## Circus Timber!

Queen Elizabeth Hall

★★★★☆

Circus companies, especially those operating on a small scale like Cirque Alfonse, are often multi-generational family affairs. The French-Canadian outfit's highly agreeable production *Timber!* is making its UK debut at the Southbank. Among the cast are sexagenarian decorator-turned-performer Alain Carabinier, his adult offspring Julie (sprightly, dance-trained) and Antoine (muscular, circus-trained), Julie's offstage boyfriend Jonathan Casaubon (an acrobat par excellence) and, in a couple of scene-stealing cameos, their two-year-old son Arthur. On top of that this uniquely flavoursome show was created in a barn on the family farm 90 minutes north of Montreal.

Lasting a similar length of time, *Timber!* is permeated by the feel of the forest. The set, with its plywood floor and upstage slats of wood, suggests a logging camp. The men tend to be big, burly and bearded. The opening scene, set to a toe-tapping Québécois folk tune played live, features stump-hurling, a meal preparation in which potatoes are sliced in mid-air with a cleaver, and a neat spate of synchronised hand-axe juggling.

The people onstage are multi-taskers whose unpretentious bonhomie generates a welcoming atmosphere from the start. The Carabinier clan all sing and play instruments. The officially designated musicians are no slouches either as they contribute to a generally lively stream of physical activity. And if the performance occasionally stumbles into low-brow comic contrivance (mainly involving Papa Carabinier in the outhouse) it does so without losing any goodwill.

There's an amusing log-balancing game, Julie does a clog dance and Papa is sprung from his rocking chair via harness and bungee cord. In a satisfyingly tense display of brawn and

prowess the Finnish strongman Matias Salmenaho becomes a sweaty fulcrum upon which Antoine and Jonathan (not exactly featherweights) balance. The latter joins Julie after her exhilarating spin on two long ropes, the couple slipping effortlessly into a double act love duet.

**Donald Hutera**

**Box office: 0844 8479910, to July 31**