

# Circostrada Network

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Arts Writers  
& Circus Arts

HORS LES MURS

# Arts Writers & Circus Arts

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# Presentation

From the needs identified by the circus sector during the *Fresh Circus* European seminar, and in partnership with TEAM Network (Transdisciplinary European Arts Magazines Network), we organised the very first residency for critics, cultural journalists and editors of arts magazines.

Our purpose was to introduce them to the aesthetics of the contemporary circus, allow them to attend a series of performances, schedule encounters with artists, expose them to a series of thematic discussions on the circus arts and provide the necessary conditions for a deep reflection on the creative and innovative aspects of the circus within the realm of the performing arts and contemporary creation.

This event was held in Paris (France) in June 2009 in collaboration with two festivals: the third (and unfortunately last) edition of *Des auteurs, des cirques* organised by the Parc de la Villette, dedicated to the most hybrid compositions of contemporary circus; the programme focused on the exploration of limits: physical limits, limits of the artistic discipline, aesthetic limits and compositional limits. The other partner event was the ninth edition of *Solstice*, organised by the Théâtre Firmin-Gémier in Antony, dedicated to acrobatic, eccentric and burlesque feats under big tops for the whole family.

12 participants from 10 countries were welcomed, most of them are theatre and dance writers: Isabelle Bats, Mary Brennan, João Carneiro, Viktoria Dalborg, Emmanuelle Dreyfus, Eleonora Felisatti, Maria Giulia Guiducci, Bauke Lievens, Christos Polymenakos, Katja Praznik, Ivana Slunjski and Tomi Purovaara. The debates were moderated by Thomas Hahn.

Apart from the four-day exchanges, they attended several shows: *Warm* (company Rictus, text by Ronan Chéneau, direction and scenography by David Bobee), *Hop là! Fascinus* (collective creation by Le Cheptel Aleikoum, Les Octavio and Les Possédés, based on an original idea by Pierre Guillois), *Le Sort du dedans* (Baro d'Evel CIRK Company, conceived and directed by Camille Decourtye and Bläi Mateu Trias), *P.P.P.* (Philippe Ménard, Company Non Nova). They also had the chance to visit the circus school Académie Fratellini and the company 14:20, which was rehearsing its new performance. They also met Yveline Rapeau (Parc de la Villette), Marc Jeancourt (Théâtre Firmin-Gémier / La Piscine) and Marc Fouilland (Circuits). We sincerely thank all the artists, programmers and staff that were met during the residency for their warm welcome and their participation in our fruitful debates.

The arts writers invited were driven by the desire to get closer to the circus arts. All felt the need to confront the various contexts in which the circus is evolving today, and to reflect on the specificity of an analytical and critical discourse when writing about the circus. As part of this residency, some participants were commissioned to produce one article so that they may deepen their reflection on the circus arts. We are very glad to publish these critical texts in several languages and we are already looking forward to organising the next residency for arts writers, to be held in 2010 in Helsinki in partnership with the *Cirko* festival...

Yohann Floch  
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# A Walk in June

## Balade de Juin

Article by **Isabelle Bats**

It's June in Paris. Roland Garros is over. No more tension. People spit, some sing the "Internationale". Rue de Maubeuge. Francis Carco. Direction: HorsLesMurs. "Art writers & circus arts." Difficult. Complicated. I reread the programme. I'm not sure that I understand. Return. For me, in short, the circus is fear, permanent fear. The dread of a catastrophe. And anxiously waiting for it to be over. To finally be able to breathe. So it's a bad start. Without reason, or perhaps a smidge of curiosity. A feeling of being ridiculous. In residency. Last memory of Bouglione, Ric Hochet. I think back to 'Freaks', to the television series 'Carnivale' and I think a little about David Lynch. They are landmarks that will help me resituate myself. And I will. Might as well watch things that tend to defy weight, mass and gravity with a nearly fresh perspective. It's a series of figures, acts and techniques. These days spent talking around the table, with evenings amidst a web of feats and delicacies. Talking and trying to dissect, to scope out our positions, our points of view and our fantasies. Dreams, and there are some, pass through and settle.

*C'est juin. C'est Paris. Roland Garros est terminé. Plus de tension. Des gens crachent, des gens chantent l'Internationale. Rue de Maubeuge. Francis Carco. Direction: HorsLesMurs. "Des critiques, des cirques". Difficile. Compliqué. Je relis le programme. Je ne suis pas certaine de comprendre. Retour. Le cirque, en gros, pour moi, c'est la peur, permanente. L'angoisse de la catastrophe. Et l'attente possédée que ça finisse. Et pouvoir, alors, respirer. Me voilà mal embarquée. Sans raison, ou peut-être un bout de curiosité. Une sensation de ridicule. En résidence. Dernier souvenir Bouglione, Ric Hochet. Je repense à "Freaks", à la série télévisée "Carnivale", un peu, je pense, à David Lynch. Des points de repères qui vont m'aider à trouver le fil. Et je le trouverai. Autant regarder, avec des yeux presque neufs, ce qui tend encore à défier le poids, la masse et l'apesanteur. C'est une série de figures, d'actes, de techniques. Voici des journées autour de la table et des soirées au centre d'un enchevêtrement de prouesses, de délicatesses. Parler, tenter de disséquer, d'entrevoir nos positions, nos points de vue et nos fantasmes. Des rêves, il y en a, qui passent, qui s'installent.*

**"Oh! no, don't you put me in that box, you know what you can do with those locks"**  
*K. Hersh - Houdini's Blues.*

### **Hop là ! Fascinus ! (Le Cheptel Aleïkoum, Les Octavio and Les Possédés)**

We feel really good. The off-stage voices resound with friendship, with easy girls and boys. And I would show you my breasts in a second. We drink, unravelling our heads to the ground, in the air, to the side, and the actions flow into life with a generosity that puts me into a state of joy. Sometimes it's trickier than it seems, sometimes it's the opposite. You have to love nonsense, and the energy of tangy candies. You have to think love stories are important and try to forget the text. Text polishes it a bit too much and gives clues that discard the show into the realm of triviality. So, to think that if I held on to a batch of balloons that was flying away, multi-coloured, and if, delirious, I were to take flight, I would be the heart of the show. Open, crawling, quiet in its happy contagion, feverish in its meek drowsiness. There is no need for anything else: actors, nonsensical and childish clowns, jumpers, singers, guitars, acrobats, sea foam and an aquatic monster. I'm 5 years old. I'm afraid to go to sleep and I'm thrilled to go to sleep: I'll have a delightful nightmare. Late Friday night. Outside, there is water, broken bottles, fake jugglers and some real idlers. The metro lines are not diverted. Diversity, we know, is like everywhere else. Everything mixes and intertwines. Very well. Shows are no longer defined by just one genre, a bit like in heavy metal. Choose your genre: black metal, death metal, doom metal, power metal, speed metal, Viking metal. Then there's fusion: crust punk, drone metal, metalcore... I guess that it's the same in the performing arts. Everything is up for grabs: dance, performance art, body painting, theatre, circus, music, songs, video... All of that to be able to speak, digest, direct. It's near to oneself, to life, to eternal channel surfing. One does not have to be literate, just follow along politely. Sometimes we get there and it is simply, absolutely beautiful. Sometimes. Tricks.

### **Hop là ! Fascinus ! (Le Cheptel Aleïkoum, Les Octavio et Les Possédés)**

*Voilà comme on se sent bien. Les voix off résonnent d'amitié, de filles et de garçons faciles. Et je vous montrerais mes seins à la seconde. On boit, on se dévisse la tête en bas, en l'air, de biais et les actes se déversent dans la vie d'une générosité qui me met en joie. Parfois c'est plus malin que ça en a l'air, parfois c'est l'inverse. Il faut aimer le n'importe quoi, l'énergie des bonbons acidulés. Il faut trouver importantes les histoires d'amour, et tenter d'oublier le texte qui arrondit un peu trop, qui fournit des indices qui rejettent le spectacle dans le trivial. Alors, que je pense que si je m'accrochais à une mêlée de ballons qui s'envolent, multicolores et si je prenais un envol alors déliré, je serais au cœur de ce spectacle. Ouvert, rampant, tranquille dans sa contagion heureuse, fiévreux dans son assoupissement bonasse. Il n'y a pas besoin d'autre chose: des acteurs, des clowns au non sens enfantin, des sauteurs, des chanteurs, des guitares, des voltigeurs, de la mousse et un monstre aquatique. J'ai 5 ans, j'ai peur d'aller dormir, je me réjouis d'aller dormir: je ferai un délicieux cauchemar. Fin du vendredi soir. Dehors, il y a de l'eau, des bouteilles cassées, des faux jongleurs et des vrais désœuvrés. On ne détourne pas les lignes de métro. Le mélange, on sait, c'est comme partout. Tout se mélange, se mêle de tout. Très bien. Des spectacles ne se définissent plus par un seul genre, un peu comme en heavy metal, choisissez votre genre: black metal, death metal, doom metal, power metal, speed metal, viking metal. puis on fusionne: crust punk, drone metal, metalcore. . . C'est pareil en spectacles vivants, je suppose. Tout est bon à prendre, tout est bon dans cochon: danse, performance, body painting, théâtre, cirque, musique, chanson, vidéo. . . Le tout pour parvenir à dire, digérer, diriger. C'est proche de chez soi, de la vie, d'un zapping infini. il ne faut pas être lettré, faut suivre gentiment. Parfois, on arrive à bon port, et c'est simplement, absolument beau. Parfois. Des prouesses.*

It seems that the relationship with the spectator is essential in this turmoil between the traditional and contemporary circus. And I can understand that. On one side there is a focus on prowess and the different disciplines, on the other a desire to open things up to narration. Then there is the circle, the concentric meaning of perspective, where life is celebrated, where everything is connected, the artist, the spectator, the smell and the noise. And this is an attribute that must be taken into account. I'll remember that. But I find that, in any case, this will not be enough, far from it. We come up against our feeling of a fourth wall in spite of ourselves. We are at the defeat of a way of looking at things and hearing them. We think cabaret. We think music-hall. This is because we distort everything, all we watch and all we see, all that we can touch. It's in the rewriting of facts. It's in the fear of feelings, or even emotions. And now I think I'm about to scratch through it. You just have to cross the bridge. Forget the discussions.

*La relation au spectateur est primordiale, semble-t-il. Dans cet tourmente entre cirque traditionnel et cirque contemporain. Et ça, je peux le comprendre. D'une part la part belle aux prouesses, aux disciplines, d'autre part un désir de s'ouvrir à la narration. Puis, il y a le cercle, le sens concentrique du regard, l'endroit où la vie se célèbre, où tout s'entremêle, l'artiste, le spectateur, l'odeur, le bruit. Et ça, est un attribut qu'il faut tenir en compte. Je retiens. Mais je trouve que dans tous les cas, ça ne va pas assez fort. Il s'en faudrait de beaucoup. Du coup. Nos sensations de quatrième mur nous heurte, sans le faire exprès, on est dans la déroute d'un angle de regard et d'écoute. On pense cabaret, on pense music hall. Comme nous déformons tout, tout ce que nous regardons, tout ce que nous voyons, tout ce que nous ne pouvons toucher. C'est dans la réécriture de faits. C'est dans la peur des sensations, des émotions presque. Et là, je crois que je suis en passe de gratter au travers. Il suffit de passer le pont. Oublier les discussions.*

*"Every breath is death defying" Smog - River Guard.*

### *Warm (Rictus)*

Yes, impressive. In this machine that works itself up. These two acrobats, pushed to the limits by the rising heat. And this text of sex, seepage and sweat. It's impressive and it's very well thought-out. It's made to find a fault to slip into and to take from behind by the throat, slowly but surely. I don't know. Taking a technique and freeing it from its folklore; sure, like playing guitar with a carrot for a pick. Yes. I prefer professional wrestling. I prefer there to be nothing to say. For all the sweat to be like magnesia on the hands, useful, a tool. This a picture of men and women in a hallucinatory sleep. Heat Wave / Crime Wave. Falling, slipping, abounding to error. But it isn't war. It's to be seen, heard. It's made for pulling on elastics. There are words that I don't understand.

### *Warm (Rictus)*

*Oui, impressionnant. Dans cette machine qui s'emballe. Dans ces deux acrobates poussés aux limites par la chaleur qui augmente. Et ce texte de sexe, de suintements, de sueurs. C'est impressionnant, c'est très réfléchi. C'est fait pour trouver une faille et s'y glisser et prendre à revers, prendre à la gorge, lentement mais sûrement. Je ne sais pas. Prendre la technique et la dégager de son folklore; oui, comme jouer de la guitare avec une carotte en guise de plectre. Oui. Je préfère le catch. Je préfère qu'il n'y ai rien à dire. Que toute sueur soit vécue comme la magnésie sur les mains, en utilité, en outil. Voici une peinture des hommes et des femmes dans un sommeil halluciné. Heat Wave/ Crime Wave. Chuter, glisser, fourmiller jusqu'à l'erreur.*



Serious breaches. Really? Discussions of codes, composition, perspective, the role of the critic. This is an upsetting factor for me. I'm very simple, I either like it or I don't. But some people try to be specialists. A study of words, verbs, graphics, a scale of understandings and apprehensions. Then, there is a horse. For me that changes everything.

*Mais ce n'est pas la guerre. C'est à voir, à entendre. C'est fait pour tirer sur des élastiques. Il y a des mots que je ne comprends pas. De graves manquements. Vraiment ? Discussions sur les codes, de l'écriture, du regard, de la fonction critique. C'est un facteur de dérèglement, pour moi. Je reste au niveau des pâquerettes. J'aime bien/j'aime pas. Mais des gens tentent la spécialisation. Une étude en mots, verbes, graphiques, grilles de compréhension et appréhension. Puis, il y a un cheval. Pour moi, ça change tout.*

*"How much fits between the eyes of a horse?" Patti Smith - Horses.*

### *Le sort du dedans (Baro d'éveil)*

What I take for naïveté, great respect and a connection between men and horses, like between pollen and dictionary, is not really new or innovative. It's the tent. The old games of strength, connection and gentleness. So yes "as for me", we say, "I would make it snow", "I would make the play with the body more extreme, more sensual. I would try to break the rules", right. But there is no action, no justification here. I'm simply happy. Sometimes I get bored. Then there's a jolt. That's life. There's some galloping, a man and a woman, a tango without any specific music, a man with an instrument makes some scratching noises. But you can see that anyway. Watch, refresh the eyes. At eight years old, in the field, someone holds on to the horse, you can pet it, give it an apple and then ride bareback for 5 minutes. The only 5 minutes when you really let go. The tether was there, but still. It wasn't just any day, or just any person. It's like a pound cake, easy, quick, a recognisable taste, familiar, easy. It's not the most exotic thing, but we always come back to it. It's all there is to see. Concern. Concern for the critic in the back. Form is also talked about. Vocabulary. A charter? A vade mecum? Execute an act, interesting, cut off its head in the process and offer it a nice

### *Le sort du dedans (Baro d'éveil)*

*Ce que je prends pour de la naïveté, du grand respect, de la filiation entre homme et cheval comme entre pollen et dictionnaire. Il ne s'agit pas de nouveauté, d'innovation. C'est la tente. Les vieux jeux de puissances, de rapports, de douceur. Alors oui, "moi", on se dit, "je ferais neiger", "je ferais des jeux de corps plus extrêmes, plus sensuels, je tenterais de faire claquer les règles", oui. Mais ça n'a pas d'action, pas de raison d'être ici. Je suis juste contente, parfois je m'ennuie, puis, il y a un soubresaut, c'est la vie, ça galope un peu, une homme et une femme, un tango sans musique spécifique, un homme musicien fait des grincements. Mais on peut le voir sans. Regarder, se rafraîchir les yeux. On avait huit ans, dans le pré, on nous tenait le cheval, on pouvait le caresser, partager une pomme et puis, à cru, on montait pour 5 minutes, les 5 seules minutes où on s'est laissé emporté, à longueur de longe, mais quand même. C'est pas tous les jours, c'est pas tout le monde. C'est comme un quatre quarts, facile, immédiat, un goût connu, reconnu, familier, facile, on rêverait de plus exotique, mais on est là, toujours, la main dans la pâte. C'est tout ce qu'il y a à voir. Sollicitude. Solitude du critique de fond. On parle de forme aussi. Vocabulaire. Une charte ? Un vade-mecum ? Exécuter un acte, intéressant, lui*



burial. The new circus / contemporary circus and the struggle of genres, and the potential declensions of doubt, delirium and shortcuts taken to be able to talk about it, write about it, talk to it and jeopardise it. One would be the place where the circus is itself the object, the other would be the place where the circus is itself a tool. A nice tool case, though. And people and characters who develop, and give it value.

*couper la tête dans le processus et lui offrir un bel enterrement. Le nouveau cirque/ le cirque contemporain et la lutte des genres, et les déclinaisons possibles de doutes, de deliriums, de chemins de traverse afin de pouvoir en parler, en écrire, tutoyer, mettre à mal. L'un serait l'endroit où le cirque est en soi l'objet, l'autre serait l'endroit où le cirque est en soi un outil. Une belle caisse à outils de toute façon. Et des personnes, des personnages qui évoluent, qui donnent valeur.*

**“He stands alight, the flames of a clear eye, we ride from here on, to his kingdom of ice”** *Wovenhand - Kingdom of Ice.*

### **P.P.P. (Cie non nova)**

Oh, the relevance of a charming man and woman, a tactful juggler, I see. A range of moods, both of the mind and body, and what comes out. And it's absolutely freezing, probably, in a desert of uncertainties and certainties. The stage is arctic, of ice, all forms of ice, convertible stages, transitional stages from a solid body to a liquid one, just the air, fizzy (but that will come). There's the alchemy. Not everything one touches is gold. Many directions, questions and responses. To juggle what can't be juggled. To see a show more as an intimate moment than as a kind of haute cuisine spoiled before our eyes. So then despite love, attention and interest, I remain in the space of the sterilised. There's distance, interference. Beyond the technique in question, beyond the man in question, beyond the mutating landscape. At the meeting place of the probable and the fanciful, I am absent. I dream of chilblains, and splits within us, at the moment of a moment's flight, freeze frames. On the voices. A purifying waterfall and heavy water drawn. It's the dead sea like walking on water. Touch and our fingertips have lost sensation. Absolute. Absolute indecision takes hold of us when it's time to close the opened box of our questions on writing, describing, critiquing an art, motion (emotional), a living art (and thus mutating), an art of frictions, transgressions, at the meeting place of childhood and an arrival at the age of adulthood. I don't know. I am neither a critic nor a specialist of the circus. I followed a path of discovery, of riches. That's enough (almost).

### **P.P.P. (Cie non nova)**

*Oh! Pertinence d'un homme charmant, une femme charmante, jongleur délicat, je vois. Un plancher des humeurs, des humeurs de la tête autant que des humeurs du corps, de ce qui sort. Alors, il fait un froid de canard, probablement, dans un désert d'incertitudes et de certitudes. La scène est polaire, de glace, des toutes formes de glaces, des étapes transformables, des étapes de passage de corps solide en corps liquide, reste l'air, le gazeux (mais ça va venir). Alors, l'alchimie. Tout ce qu'on touche n'est pas or. Multiples directions des questions et des réponses. Jongler l'injonglable. Voir un spectacle plus comme un moment intime que comme une haute cuisine déflorée devant nos yeux. Alors, bon, malgré amour, attention, malgré intérêt, je rentre dans l'endroit de l'aseptisé, il y a distance, il y a interférence. Au delà de la technique remise en question, au delà de l'homme remis en question, au delà du paysage en mutation. Là où se rencontreraient le probable et le chimérique, je prends absence. Je rêve d'engelures, de cassures en nous, au moment du vol des moments, des arrêts sur images. Sur les voix. Une cascade purifiante et l'eau lourde puise, c'est la mer morte comme alors marcher sur l'eau. Toucher et nos bouts de doigts ont perdu de leur sens. Absolu. Absolue indécision qui nous saisit au moment de refermer le coffre déballé de nos questions sur écrire, décrire, critiquer un art, mouvant (émouvant), un art vivant (donc mutant), un art de frictions, transgressions, où se rencontrent une enfance et une accession à l'âge adulte. Je ne sais pas. Je ne suis ni critique, ni spécialiste du cirque. J'ai fait une route de découvertes, de richesses. Ça suffit (ou presque).*

# Circus – What Circus? Where?

Article by **Mary Brennan**

The Edinburgh Fringe 2009 brochure is lying open on my desk. Halfway down page 212 is the entry for the Moscow State Circus and its current touring show, *Legenda*. No clue as to who or what might be legendary here, only the promise of 'a huge cast of Russia's greatest and most flexible circus performers.' This show, however, is listed in the 'Theatre' section, looking somewhat out of place alongside a production of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, a version of Buchner's *Woyzeck* and a piece of radical performance by Station House Opera called *Mind Out*. I've seen this: I know for a fact it doesn't involve any high-wire work, or strong man stunts. And I'm pretty sure than whatever else occurs in *Mother Courage*, a trapeze won't be a part of how she travels from one army camp to another. *Woyzeck*? Well the original scenario could bend in several ways that could encompass the extreme challenges and brinkmanship of various circus skills – it has been done, I believe... but not here. This production is interested in making the words tumble, fly and excite onlookers while the performers stay grounded, trying not to juggle their cues.

So why is the essentially traditional Moscow State Circus – and one or two other companies who clearly are exploring 'new circus' elements in their work – listing their show as 'Theatre' rather than under the other, surely more appropriate brochure heading, of 'Dance and Physical Theatre.' Australia's *Circa*, with an international reputation for delivering virtuoso circus skills in innovative ways, has put itself in this latter category. So too have companies who choreograph serious, accomplished aerial work in their dance pieces or use acrobatics and balancing to give a calculated adrenalin rush to risky encounters in emotive episodes of physical theatre. Why the body-swerve across definitions by a handful of ensembles?

Well, I doubt if the Moscow State Circus did this to hide from critics like myself, experienced in terms of dance, physical theatre, live art and pantomime – able to take in mime, puppetry and mask-work, albeit not with a particularly detailed grasp of all techniques... but with no real sense of circus, old or new or contemporary, beyond the hazy memories of childhood and the occasional glimpse of a Cirque du Soleil arena spectacular.

It could be, however, that the company's promoters felt that 'Dance and Physical Theatre' was an off-putting label that hinted at esoteric pursuits with little or no popular appeal. That, in the same way some people never read Arts pages in newspapers, Fringe-goers would simply never browse through the slender section that cheerfully puts flamenco groups and performance artists in alphabetical order but then leaves people to decipher what each brief, promotional blurb actually means. I'm paid to review shows that describe themselves as 'an athletic-puppetic duet with my dad in drag (78)' or 'a cacophony of scurrilous buffoonery.' I am not intimidated, or put off by the prospect of someone 'standing in the middle of all paradoxes.' But if I, in the shoes of a Fringe-goer, only had limited time and a tight budget at my disposal, perhaps I wouldn't care to risk either on shows that left me feeling bamboozled just by reading their own brochure entry.

Two far-reaching issues emerge from the above: the question of art-form identity and the challenge of finding the right vocabulary for each art-form. Circus-old, new or in hybrid mode – suffers badly on both counts, as far as Scotland (and probably the whole UK) is concerned. The recent residency for writers at HorsLesMurs simply confirmed what I already knew: even if we had regular circus performances in Scotland – which we don't – we, audiences and critics alike, have to borrow in words from other disciplines to express our opinions. Does this really matter? If a performance genuinely engages and entertains an audience, do they need to know that its origins are in circus? If a review is fair-minded, informative and thoughtful, is it any the less valid because the critic can't reference the exact skills or equipment involved?

I'm on a kind of personal teeter-board here. Writing for a daily broadsheet – The Herald – part of my remit is to serve a general readership which has varying degrees of interest in, and knowledge of, the art-forms that are my main concern. Balletomanes might mourn the absence of port-de-bras and bourrees in my copy, just as those with a refined academic interest in live art and performance will search in vain for the happening jargon or the post-post-modern phraseology that haunts the pages of PhD theses and post-graduate research. But if I choose to make the 'in-house' techno-speak, with its specialised frame of references, into the bedrock of my own critical vocabulary then I'm creating a negative sub-text for those who aren't 'in the know.' I'm running the risk of saying that ballet, or performance, or new circus is an artform-club that they can't really join, not if they can't distinguish between an arabesque and an attitude or haven't passed the test that gauges degrees of difference between a tight-rope and a slack one...

But if – teeter, teeter, teeter... If I have no awareness of these nuances – or a proper grasp of the physical and mental skills that underpin the execution of a classical pas-de-deux or an acrobatic partnership – then how can I give an honest review of what I've been watching. Dammit! – how are the artists going to know how CLEVER I am, if I don't send them the written clues that signal the impressive breadth and depth of my well-researched, highly observant response to their work... Please, please, do not take that last sentence seriously: for while I think it's important for me to learn about the art-forms I write about – seeing as much work as I can, reading up on background and developments, meeting the artists themselves – I see my job, my byline, as a privilege that shouldn't be a personal ego-trip. It carries responsibilities.

I'd describe my function in terms of an interface between artists and the general public. As the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe approaches, I'm already thinking about how I can style my writing so as to nudge readers towards what isn't necessarily obvious from the brochure listings – not just the welcome strand of new circus, but shows that benefit from a cross-fertilization of concepts, process and expertise. Old notions of circus die hard. It's years since any touring circus company used animal acts, yet if you stopped local





in the visual imagery of flying, of balancing, of juggling, a source of visceral and involving metaphors that can wordlessly express aspects of the human condition. Devotees of circus might say it was always thus – but, as we know from scanning the histories of all art-forms, styles drop in and out of fashion, often as the economic climate changes.

Already, too, there are signs that when mainstream theatre or dance borrows in elements of circus – usually aerial work – the audience responds with an enthusiasm that goes beyond the enjoyment of a diverting novelty. The circus energy flicks switches in the onlookers' imagination. Takes those of us whose feet are firmly on the ground – or maybe the treadmill of daily life – into another dimension. Perhaps we wonder can he – can I? – keep all those balls in the air..? Will his partner catch him mid-air? (Is there anyone there to catch me if...?).

Time then, for those of us in the media to make sure that we give credit for these influencing skills where it is due: in the realms of circus. The word bestows identity. Maybe come August 2010, the Fringe brochure will see more companies using that identity with pride and confidence.

passers-by in Edinburgh and asked them to describe a circus to some-one who had never seen one, chances are they would paint a yester-year image of traditions that even the Moscow State Circus doesn't bring into the ring anymore.

Some of the younger ones might refer to the cabaret-cum-freak shows – the scary oddball tack favoured by American Jim Rose or the rock-Gothic spectacle, Circus of Horrors – which max out their publicity with promises of gore and more. Any UK or Scottish tour of such shows is likely to generate at least one 'Shock – outrage!' headline, even though the performances themselves rarely have the full metal mayhem of the very first Archaos productions to hit our venues, motor-cycles and chain-saws snarling out decibels of hell-for-leather danger. Others – mostly drawing on memories of what they've seen on trips abroad – will talk in terms of fantastical events, exquisitely costumed, full of dazzling special effects with really great live music... oh, and people on trapezes or doing aerial work. But in truth, what seems to impress at the time – and linger on, afterwards – are the trappings rather than the circus skills within the mise-en-scene.

What words will make the right kind of break-through in these circumstances? Words that will not traduce the heritage that connects the roots and branches of circus across the ages, but which will draw audiences towards work that has itself represented once familiar acts and, increasingly, brought out the inherent humanity of what the skills embody. Let's fix on that word, 'humanity'. The recent upsurge of interest in learning professional circus skills in Scotland – England is a tad more forward in its training opportunities – suggests that the hands-on physicality of circus is speaking to new generations of performers. They see

# The New Circus of Italy

## At What Stage is Specialised Criticism?

### *Il Nuovo Circo d'Italia. A che punto si trova la sua critica specialistica?*

Article by **Eleonora Felisatti**

Don't be mistaken by the title, there's no political satire here! I rather mean to add a reflection around the abused concept of 'contemporary' in performing arts. "Again!", the operators might complain. This time the novelty is, at least for Italy, the type of show. I'll move, in fact, within circus arts. The present evaluation gravitates around those forms referable to 'Nouveau Cirque', a genre very blazoned beyond the Alps, but which in Italy still has difficulties taking root and to which, as consequence, addresses a criticism not really 'specialized', but who generally investigates research theatre, contemporary dance and, potentially, street performances. Essentially, the result of such analysis is not necessarily misleading, but it actually risks having wide margins of imprecision, especially in the references to the history of the discipline and of its most renowned representatives.

In a recent confrontation between critics coming from various European countries, we reflected upon the 'tools of our craft' we would have used to write about a performance considered as belonging to the genre of contemporary circus, or which contains at least some of its characterising features. This question opens up to a further front of complications, which is the label used by artistic directions of festivals, events and playbills to insert in their programs the performances connectable to circus. At present, in Italy, the issue hasn't arisen massively, probably because the exiguous productions of works inspired by and to 'Nouveau Cirque' is exhaustively absorbed inside the multidisciplinary festivals of contemporary arts, within the distinction of the macro-areas of theatre, dance, music, installation. Nonetheless, the gradual but visible utilisation of features typical in circus shows could, in the near future, necessitate a more defined and definitive space within contemporary performing arts. This would imply, as a consequence, the definition of a specific lexicon, the designation of spaces appointed to these shows, and especially the shaping of well-recognisable professionalism among those who study, write and divulge this declination of contemporary shows.

Having said this, I believe that criticism of 'New Circus' would find its specificity within the discipline itself, like any specialised field. The first step, more logical, for the shaping of a specific competence in the field of contemporary circus, is to go through experiences both of fruition and of constructions of works, possibly with the contribution of a significant number of operators, so that the discourse arising will be variegated, allowing possibilities of confrontation. If this already happens in various Scandinavian countries and in France, it does not happen in Italy. In the country that gave birth to the first forms of circus during the Roman age, today only one review exists, as far as I know, which deals with 'New Circus'. *Juggling Magazine* has been following Italian circus arts for eleven years, but it does it in a transverse way being born as a meeting point between technicians and juggling fans. Only one periodical publication in this sector, on the entire national territory is clearly insufficient to gather and form a varied critical overview.

*Non lasciatevi ingannare dal titolo, non si farà satira politica in questa sede. Intendo, piuttosto, aggiungere una riflessione intorno all'abusato concetto di 'contemporaneo' nell'ambito delle arti performative. "Di nuovo!" potrebbero lamentare gli addetti ai lavori. La novità, questa volta, è, almeno per l'Italia, il tipo di spettacolo. Mi muoverò, infatti, nell'ambito delle arti circensi. La presente valutazione gravita intorno a quelle forme riconducibili al 'Nouveau Cirque', genere tanto blasonato oltralpe, che in Italia ancora stenta a prendere piede e di cui, di conseguenza, si occupa una critica non propriamente "specializzata", ma che generalmente indaga teatro di ricerca, danza contemporanea ed eventualmente di performance di strada. In fondo il risultato di tali approfondimenti non è necessariamente fuorviante, ma rischia effettivamente di avere larghi margini d'imprecisione, soprattutto nei riferimenti alla storia della disciplina e ai suoi rappresentanti più illustri.*

*In un recente confronto tra critici provenienti da vari paesi d'Europa, ci siamo trovati a ragionare su quali dei nostri "strumenti del mestiere" avremmo utilizzato per scrivere di una performance che si considera appartenente al genere del circo contemporaneo, o che ne contenga comunque elementi caratterizzanti. Questa domanda apre un'ulteriore fronte di complicazioni, ovverosia l'etichetta di cui le direzioni artistiche di festival, eventi e cartelloni di teatri si servono per includere nei loro calendari le performances legate al mondo del circo. Al momento, in Italia, la questione non si è posta in maniera massiccia, probabilmente perché l'esigua produzione di lavori ispirati al e dal 'Nouveau Cirque' viene egregiamente assorbita nei pluridisciplinari festival di arti contemporanee, all'interno della suddivisione tra le macro-aree di teatro, danza, musica, installazione. Il graduale ma visibile sfruttamento di elementi tipici degli spettacoli circensi potrebbe però far sorgere, in un futuro abbastanza prossimo, la necessità di ritagliarsi uno spazio più definito e definitivo all'interno del panorama delle arti performative contemporanee. E questo porterebbe, come conseguenza, la definizione di un lessico specifico, la designazione di luoghi deputati a tali spettacoli, e soprattutto la formazione di una professionalità ben riconoscibile tra coloro che studiano, scrivono e divulgano tale declinazione dello spettacolo contemporaneo.*

*Detto questo, ritengo che una critica di 'Nuovo Circo' trovi le sue specificità all'interno della disciplina stessa, come ogni studio specialistico. Il primo passo, più logico, per la formazione di una competenza specifica nel settore del circo contemporaneo è l'attraversamento di esperienze sia di fruizione, che di costruzione di opere, possibilmente con l'apporto di un numero significativo di operatori, in modo tale che si crei un discorso variegato che lasci spazio a possibilità di confronto. Se questo avviene già in diversi paesi scandinavi e in Francia, non succede invece in Italia. Nella terra che diede i natali alle prime forme di circo all'epoca romana, esiste oggi, che mi risulti, una sola rivista che tratti di 'Nuovo Circo'. *Juggling Magazine* ormai da undici anni si occupa di arti circensi, ma lo fa trasversalmente essendo nata come punto d'incontro per appassionati e tecnici di giocoleria. Una*



Festival "Des auteurs, des cirques" - Warm - David Bobee / Groupe Rictus - Parc de la Villette © C. Raynaud de Lage

From the example of the above-mentioned magazine a rather obvious reflection arises: also in Italy there are 'fans' of circus, meaning those who read about it, but also 'experts', those who write about it. Actually, looking through the past issues, a blend of interventions stands out, resulting from reflections both by the operators (the so-called circus artists and their descendant) and of people who have demonstrated their own, self-built critical competence following step by step the phases of evolution, involution and standstill of circus arts in the country. In particular, there is a high concentration of contributions on 'New Circus' in the issues of 2003, a year in which the project of Arcipelago Circo Teatro in collaboration with the Venice Biennale ended. Already, at the beginning of this three-year period, Gigi Cristoforetti proposed for one of the first issues of the newly born magazine Art'O, a reflection upon the absence of economic and organising support to the new forms of circus in Italy. Unfortunately, after 2003, the omen of the important circus critic revealed itself as extremely realistic, since it became obvious there would have been no propulsion towards production, diffusion and following reflection upon performances within contemporary circus. The survival of the editorial project connected to the Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni witnesses though, how is actually felt the exigency of dealing with this topic also today, even if just from a niche.

Two of the articles in the issues of *Juggling Magazine* 2003 have a particular relevance, from my point of view. In fact, they are emblematic of the issue, clearly urgently felt, of the non-existence of a 'new circus' in Italy, which was by the same standards of the foreign forms of 'Nouveau Cirque' organization-wise and quality-wise. The other article is relevant for a peculiar aspect of circus as tradition. On the one hand Raffaele De Ritis, author

*sola pubblicazione periodica di tale settore sull'intero territorio nazionale è evidentemente insufficiente a raccogliere e formare un panorama critico vario*

*Dall'esempio della suddetta rivista sorge una riflessione piuttosto ovvia, ossia che anche in Italia esistono 'appassionati' di circo, ovvero coloro che ne leggono, ma anche 'esperti' di circo, ovvero coloro che ne scrivono. In realtà, curiosando tra i numeri passati, balza all'occhio una mescolanza d'interventi, frutto di riflessioni sia di addetti ai lavori (i cosiddetti circensi e loro discendenti), che di persone che dimostrano di essersi costruite una competenza critica seguendo passo-passo le fasi di evoluzione, involuzione e stasi delle arti circensi nel paese. In particolare, vi è un'alta concentrazione di contributi sul 'Nuovo Circo' nelle uscite del 2003, anno in cui si conclude il triennale progetto di Arcipelago Circo Teatro in collaborazione con la Biennale di Venezia. Già all'inizio di questo progetto, Gigi Cristoforetti aveva proposto per uno dei primo numeri dell'allora neonata rivista Art'O, una riflessione sull'assenza di supporto economico e organizzativo alle nuove forme di circo in Italia. Purtroppo dopo il 2003 il presagio di questo importante studioso di circo, si è rivelato estremamente realistico, in quanto non sembra esserci stata alcuna propulsione verso la produzione, diffusione e successiva riflessione su eventi spettacolari nell'ambito del circo contemporaneo. La sopravvivenza del progetto editoriale collegato all'Associazione Giocolieri e Dintorni testimonia, però, come effettivamente l'esigenza di occuparsene sia a tutt'oggi sentita, anche solo da una nicchia.*

*Degli articoli contenuti nelle uscite di Juggling Magazine del 2003, due hanno una rilevanza particolare, a mio avviso. Essi sono emblematici: uno della questione, sentita in maniera*



of "Il nuovo circo che (non) c'è" (#20, 2003), reflects upon the ostracism of journalists and boards in charge towards the forms of experimental circus. On the other hand, Livio Togni, heir of an illustrious and historical Italian family of circus artists, in his "Le virtù della contaminazione" (#21, 2003), highlights a crucial aspect of working within traditional circus. Contamination, in the circus, is that of language, age, and geographical origins, but also that of skills, the division of duties, genres and numbers that can be proposed to the public. Togni finds in contamination the focal point of his art. Actually, any reader that comes across this writing cannot help but go back with memories to when, as child, he or she was fascinated by the multiplicity of characters and acts that were proposed underneath the big top.

I mentioned these two examples because I believe they can be particularly stimulating for that part of critics, which happen to watch and appreciate the research that takes place in Italian circus arts. Considering that nearly ten years ago someone perceived the void in such research, but that, at the same time, someone involved in the field highlighted the strong presence of the element of contamination inside the discipline, well I believe it is in this interstitial space that the basis can be laid, for widening and investigation of specialized critics. First of all, we must consider that Italian consumers of contemporary circus exist, and I'm not referring only to the readers of the above-mentioned specialized magazine, but also to all the spectators that show up in festivals like Teatro a Corte (recently terminated in the Savoy residencies), or at the International Contemporary Circus Feast in Brescia (founded in 1998 by the cited Cristoforetti and temporarily suspended by will of the local authorities, but which should restart next year under itinerant form), just to mention some. Whereupon, we can consider gathering Togni's intervention as a suggestion on the type of approach to adopt in analysing a work of art in which elements of 'new circus' can be recognisable. Consulting texts whose subject is circus and its history, but also its declinations and influences, could ideally complete the whole. In fact, I want to strike a blow for the theoretical part of the discipline, at present rather unknown, but which results on the whole well equipped if we search, not even too perilously, for texts that deal with the history, evolution and practice of circus arts. There are also analyses about the presence of these last in other arts: both as source of inspiration, suffice it to think of the fetish circus seemed to be for Fellini, and as added value in performances created by professionals of other disciplines.

I conclude these considerations on the possibilities of art criticism to confront itself with contemporary circus, launching a small and perhaps banal provocation. After all, till now, criticism has welcomed and faced other areas of research that came to blend in the so-called 'avant-garde performances', from oriental meditation disciplines, to neurosciences, to psychoanalysis, up to new technologies. I think 'New Circus' can be tackled on the whole, with a 'light heart', because it's fed by and develops all the elements of performing arts, real nourishment for critics.

*evidentemente piuttosto urgente, della non-esistenza di un 'circo nuovo' in Italia, che fosse alla stregua delle forme straniere di 'Nuveau Cirque'. A livello organizzativo e qualitativo, e l'altro di un aspetto peculiare delle circo come tradizione. Da un lato Raffaele De Ritis, autore dell'articolo Il nuovo circo che (non) c'è, n.20/2003, ragiona sull'ostracismo di giornalisti ed enti preposti nei confronti delle forme di circo sperimentale. Dall'altro lato Livio Togni, erede di un illustre e storica famiglia italiana di circensi, nel suo Le virtù della contaminazione, n.21/2003, mette in luce un aspetto cruciale del lavoro all'interno del circo tradizionale. La contaminazione, nel circo, è quella della lingua, dell'età, della provenienza geografica, ma anche quella delle abilità, della suddivisione dei compiti, di generi, di numeri che si possono proporre al pubblico. Togni individua proprio nella contaminazione il punto focale della sua arte, ed effettivamente qualsiasi lettore che s'imbatta in questo pezzo non può non tornare coi ricordi a quando, da bambino, rimaneva affascinato dalla molteplicità di personaggi e numeri che venivano proposti sotto il tendone dei circhi itineranti.*

*Ho voluto riportare questi due esempi perché credo possano essere particolarmente stimolanti per quella parte di critica che si trova a vedere ed apprezzare il lavoro di ricerca che si svolge oggi in Italia, nell'ambito delle arti circensi. Tenendo in considerazione il fatto che già quasi un decennio fa qualcuno avvertiva un vuoto in tale ricerca, ma che, al contempo, un addetto ai lavori evidenziava la forte presenza dell'elemento della contaminazione all'interno della disciplina, ecco credo che in questo spazio interstiziale si possano gettare le basi per un ampliamento e approfondimento della critica specializzata. Innanzi tutto bisogna considerare il fatto che un'utenza italiana di circo contemporaneo già c'è, e non mi riferisco solo ai lettori della suddetta rivista specialistica, ma anche a tutti gli spettatori che si presentano a festival come Teatro a Corte (da poco terminato nelle dimore sabaude), alla Festa Internazionale del Circo Contemporaneo di Brescia (fondata nel 1998 dal sopracitato Cristoforetti e temporaneamente sospesa per volontà delle autorità locali, ma che ripartirà l'anno prossimo in forma itinerante), giusto per fare qualche esempio. Dopodiché, si può pensare di raccogliere l'intervento di Togni come un suggerimento sul tipo di approccio da adottare nell'analisi di un lavoro in cui siano riconoscibili elementi di 'nuovo circo'. Il tutto potrebbe essere idealmente completato dalla consultazione di testi che hanno per oggetto il circo e la sua storia, ma anche le sue declinazioni e influenze. Mi sento, infatti, di spezzare una lancia in favore della parte teorica della disciplina, a presente piuttosto sconosciuta, ma che risulta tutto sommato guarnita se si cercano, neanche troppo perigliosamente, testi che trattino storia, evoluzione e pratica delle arti circensi. Ci sono anche analisi sulla presenza di queste ultime all'interno di altre arti: sia come fonte d'ispirazione, basti pensare al feticcio che sembrava diventare il circo per Fellini, sia come valore aggiunto all'interno di performance create da professionisti di altre discipline.*

*Vorrei concludere queste mie considerazioni sulle possibilità della critica d'arte di confrontarsi con spettacoli di circo contemporaneo, lanciando una piccola e forse banale provocatione. In fondo, fino a ora, la critica ha accolto e affrontato altre aree di ricerca che venivano a fondersi nelle cosiddette "performance d'avanguardia", dalle discipline di meditazione orientale, alle neuroscienze, alla psicanalisi, fin'anche alle nuove tecnologie. Credo si possa affrontare il 'Nuovo Circo' tutto sommato "a cuor sereno", perché esso si nutre e sviluppa tutti gli elementi delle arti performative, vero e proprio "pane per i denti" dei critici.*

# Digging in the Present: How New is Contemporary?

*Graven in het heden: hoe nieuw is hedendaags?*

Article by **Bauke Lievens**

Modern day circus loves to label itself as 'contemporary', a definition which stems more likely from the logic of festivals and their programmers than from the artists themselves. This observation aside, circus today proclaims by the use of this label to have abandoned a certain tradition, while at the same time avoiding a fashionable 'newness' or the pitfalls and whims of fashion and the tastes of an arbitrary market. And yet, might the label 'contemporary' only be a gentler plaster for the same wound? The term can be used to differentiate between history and the present, whereby 'contemporary circus' becomes a term for all the circus performance produced today. The label determines a point on a time-line – not that from yesterday, that from now. But in fact, traditional circus companies still exist and create performances today, thus compromising the definition. Is 'contemporary circus' then a genre unto itself? And what then are the parameters and esthetics of this genre? Circus happens today in the streets, in theaters, on lorries, in garages and circus tents. A performance can combine different circus techniques, or be a result of the meeting between art forms, (theatre, dance, video, body drumming, mime, live music, puppet theatre...). Or yet again the distillation of one specific circus technique. The performance can be conceived for children, for a general audience, for an urban or rural public, for the town square, a small arts centre or a prominent well funded venue known for its daring artistic choices.

The lack of a clear definition is not as problematic for the critic as it is for the development of the circus itself. The absence of a clear definition evokes meager attempts to compensate with the labels 'interdisciplinary' or 'the genre of difference'. Not taking into account that more and more (especially French) companies concentrate on the research of one specific technique, these post-modern open definitions present us with an empty shell, and one that doesn't help the circus arts in the least. In the past, when circus was 'new' rather than 'contemporary', the fusion of different art forms was hip and fashionable, even if that fusion often functioned as camouflage for a lack of true content. Several companies today succeed in finding deeper humanity in the content in their work by opting for the limitation: the distillation and dissection of one specific circus technique. Spectacular effect is sacrificed for choreography, semiotics and a space that has become more abstract and at the same time more human. As if circus, after a heterogenic period, is in search of that which is specific only to itself. Circus returns to its essence. One clear result of this evolution is that the body re-becomes the central source of meaning. Not the video, the light, or the costume. In theatre and dance a similar post-dramatic evolution is taking place, spurred on by a cultural and pervasive hunger for 'presence'. (A desire that also manifests itself in the hype of reality television and the overwhelming presence of physical stunts in film and games.) Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the current popularity of circus. At any rate, this presents us with what seems a better definition for 'contemporary': an art form is contemporary when it offers an answer or engages in dialogue with the needs and desires of present day man. This man can be artist or spectator, as both contribute to the creation of the same present moment.

*Het circus van vandaag defenieert zichzelf graag als 'hedendaags', een defenitie die waarschijnlijk eerder afstamt van de logica van festivals en programmatoeren dan van de artiesten zelf. Dit terzijde gelaten, geeft het circus met deze defenitie te kennen dat ze een zekere traditie heeft achtergelaten zonder dat het circus 'nieuw' is geworden in de zin van 'modieus' en onderhevig aan de grillen en smaak van de markt. Maar toch, is de term 'hedendaags' niet een zachtere pleister op dezelfde wonde? De term kan gebruikt worden als een indicatie die geschiedenis van actualiteit scheidt, waarbij 'hedendaags circus' de allesomvattende term voor de actuele circuspraktijk wordt. Het wordt een punt op de tijdlijn: niet dat van gisteren, maar dat van vandaag. Echter, er bestaan nog steeds traditionele circuscompagnies die vandaag voorstellingen maken, waardoor de term hedendaags zijn slagkracht verliest. Is 'hedendaags circus' dan eerder een genre? En wat zijn dan de grenzen en de esthetieken van dit genre? Circus vindt vandaag plaats op straat, in theaters, camions, garages en circustenten. Een voorstelling kan verschillende circustechnieken combineren, het resultaat zijn van de ontmoeting tussen verschillende kunstvormen (theater, dans, video, body drumming, mime, live muziek, poppentheater,...) of net de uitpuring zijn van één specifieke circustechniek. De voorstelling is soms bestemd voor kinderen, dan weer voor een ruimer publiek, voor een stedelijke of rurale doelgroep, voor het marktplein, een klein cultureel centrum of voor chique, grote insituties die bekend staan om hun gedurfde artistieke keuzes.*

*In de eerste plaats is het ontbreken van een defenitie niet zozeer nefast voor de critici als voor de ontwikkeling van het circus zelf. In de afwezigheid van een heldere defenitie wordt een halfslachtige poging gedaan met omschrijvingen als 'interdisciplinair' en 'het genre van het verschil'. Daar gelaten dat steeds meer (en vooral Franse) compagnies zich toeleggen op het onderzoek van één specifieke techniek, is deze post-moderne 'open'defenitie vaak een leeg omhulsel die het circus geen goed doet. In het verleden, toen circus nog 'nieuw' heette in plaats van hedendaags, was het samenbrengen van verschillende kunstvormen hip en modieus, hoewel dit vaak een leegte op het vlak van werkelijke inhoud trachtte te camoufleren. Het werk van verschillende hedendaagse compagnies doet echter een meer menselijke inhoud verschijnen doorheen de uitpuring, beperking en dissectie van een specifieke circustechniek. Het spectaculaire effect maakt plaats voor een choreografie, semiotiek en ruimte die abstracter en tegelijkertijd menselijker zijn geworden. Alsof het circus na een periode van heterogeniteit op zoek is naar wat nu echt specifiek is voor haar identiteit. In die zin keert het circus terug naar haar essentie. Wat duidelijk is in deze evolutie is dat het lichaam opnieuw de centrale betekenisgever wordt, en niet de video, noch het licht of de kostumes. Ook theater en dans maken dezelfde post-dramatische evolutie door, die in wezen wordt voortgedreven door een cultureel en wijdverspreid verlangen naar aanwezigheid. (Een verlangen dat zich ook manifesteert in de hype van de reality TV an de massale aanwezigheid van fysieke stunts in film en games.) Misschien is dit wel één van de redenden van de actuele populariteit van het circus. Alleszins lijkt dit een betere defenitie van 'hedendaags': een*

In light of the dynamic between the search for essence and contemporary rejuvenation in the circus, the job of the critic becomes at first view to be more complex. In the search for a possible beacon or compass, history is often turned to as the most obvious source of reference. Theatre and dance critics are often inclined to analyze circus from an historical perspective, and the performance can be more or less extracted from its tradition. Another option is a sort of recycled critical language full of terms like performance, event, gender issues and theatricalization. The paradox between historic voyeurism and a fashionable post-dramatic discourse probably stems from the fact that historical records of the traditions and esthetics of the circus are fragmentary. But what the contemporary critic seems to overlook is that he or she should be asking the same questions that the creators of a performance ask themselves in the making of it. This is also the reason why present reflection must involve itself in the practice of the art. Only then can the critic contribute to the development of a contemporary art form. And this brings us to a third definition for 'contemporary'; a present day art form needs present day criticism. If circus is in search of its essence, the critic must be involved in that same search. Circus today is not served by criticism that approves or disapproves, but rather by a deeper reflection on its essence and various apparitions. Important in this context is that circus is not only defined (and

*kunstvorm is hedendaags wanneer zij een antwoord biedt of een dialoog aangaat met de behoeften en verlangens van de actuele mens. Deze mens is zowel artiest als toeschouwer, want beiden zijn immers bouwstenen van dezelfde actualiteit.*

*In het licht van de bovenstaande dynamiek tussen het zoeken naar essentie en hedendaagse vernieuwing in het circus, wordt de taak van de criticus op het eerste zicht meer complex. In de zoektocht naar mogelijke vuurtorens en kompassen, dient zich onder andere de geschiedenis aan. Theater- en danscritici zijn vaak geneigd het circus te analyseren als een historische kijkwaardigheid die meer of minder kan verwijderd zijn van haar traditie. Een andere optie is een soort van gerecycleerd criticisme dat de mond vol heeft van termen als performance, event, gender-issues en theatricalisering. De paradox tussen historisch voyeurisme en een modieus post-dramatisch discours ontspringt waarschijnlijk aan het feit dat de historische kennisoverdracht rond de geschiedenis en esthetieken van het circus zeer versnipperd is. Maar wat eigenlijk vergeten wordt is dat een hedendaagse kritiek in feite dezelfde vragen zou moeten stellen dan de praktijk doet. Dat is ook de reden waarom actuele reflectie niet los mag staan van de praktijk. Enkel op die manier kan kunstkritiek bijdragen tot de ontwikkeling van een hedendaagse kunstvorm. En dit is meteen een derde invulling van de term 'hedendaags': een actuele kunstvorm vraagt om een hedendaagse kritiek. Als het circus zoekt naar haar essentie,*



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therefore also recognized) as a hybrid, interdisciplinary art-form, a cocktail of other performance arts, but rather that we reflect on what is specific to circus. It is not only a question of specific circus disciplines, but also a question of circularity, accessibility, the physical relationship between a character and the reality which surrounds him, the centrality of a body in danger, specific artistic desires and exceptional playing spaces and circumstances. It is important, I think, that critics recognize the diversity of the post-modern world, not as a diatribe, but as a fundamental reality in the artistic realm. In a world without one central story, smaller local stories come to the imagination. The contemporary artistic landscape is more akin to a moon landscape (where each artist is free to dig his own hole, in search of meaning), than a cosmos held in balance by one central myth. The circus today is faced with the challenge of charting this present situation, making its diversity contemporary and generic, which isn't to say that we mustn't continue to fight for the autonomy of circus as an art form. It is important that the definition of contemporary circus not be enlarged, but rather made more concise and concrete. With this goal in mind the critic is immediately confronted by a lack of specific critical vocabulary. One gets the feeling that we lack the tools for the analysis of a circus performance in its specificity, often resulting in a circus experience viewed through 'theatre-

*dan zou de circuskritiek hetzelfde moeten doen. Het circus van vandaag heeft geen nood aan een kritiek die goed- of afkeurt, maar aan een meer essentiële en diepe reflectie over haar aard en verschillende verschijningsvormen.*

*Belangrijk in deze context is dat circus niet enkel wordt gedefinieerd (en dus ook erkend) als een hybride, interdisciplinaire kunstvorm die een soort van cocktail is van de andere performatieve kunsten, maar dat men op zoek gaat naar wat specifiek is voor circus. Het gaat dan niet enkel om de specifieke circusdisciplines, maar ook om circulariteit, toegankelijkheid, de fysieke relatie van een personage tot de realiteit, de centraliteit van een lichaam in gevaar, specifieke artistieke verlangens en bijzondere productieruimtes en -omstandigheden. Het is belangrijk, denk ik, dat critici de diversiteit van de post-moderne wereld erkennen, niet als lege slagzin, maar als een fundamentele realiteit van het artistieke veld. In een wereld zonder één centraal verhaal worden kleine, lokale verhalen verzonnen. Het hedendaagse artistieke landschap lijkt dan ook meer op een maanlandschap waar elke artiest zijn put graaft op zoek naar betekenis dan op een kosmos die in evenwicht wordt gehouden door één bindende mythe. In dit licht tracht het circus een actuele situatie in kaart tracht te brengen, waardoor haar diversiteit hedendaags en generisch is, wat niet wil zeggen dat we niet moeten vechten voor de autonomie van het circus als*



Festival "Des auteurs, des cirques" - Hop là! Fascinus! - Le Cheptel Aleïkoum / Les Octavios / Les Possédés - Parc de la Villette © C. Raynaud de Lage

eyes' or 'dance-eyes'. Terms like dramaturgy, choreography, and other (theatrical) semantics can be very helpful in understanding and appreciating a circus performance, but at the same time they can lead to the neglect of a whole range of codes and dialectics specific to the circus piste. Precisely because circus is 'experienced' rather than 'understood', it can be fascinating to conduct an analysis of the art form through the experience of the spectator. Circus has an important roll to fulfill in a society which grows more global, virtual, and individualistic by the day. A good circus performance offers us fragments of substantial communication and shared intimacy. In this sense the circus is a ritual that confirms the visceral life we share through a physical challenge with death. And in this sense circus offers a similar cathartic experience to the Greek tragedies. Circus creates a community and bonds us, if only for a few seconds, to the animal inside of us, and the human being sitting next to us in the tribune. With which semantics can we explain and analyze the magical experience of the circus? How is movement related to meaning and the emotion of the spectator? Equally crucial in circus is the panoptic vision of the spectator and the fact that the circus artist is surrounded. What is the result of a circus performed more and more frequently in a square box, the traditional terrain of text and theatre?

Were we to analyze the circus performance following these parameters, the critic no longer needs to be an expert in each circus discipline. A new critic emerges, one whose discipline leans closer to dramaturge and philosopher. One whose critical compass does not take its bearings from presence or absence of clear definition or history. Perhaps we need to turn things around: perhaps it is precisely through observing and writing, putting into question and re-asserting, that fragments of a definition may appear and that a history may be built by linking together the empty spaces. Perhaps the job of the critic who runs along behind a present day art form is that of a contemporary archeologist, digging in the present.

*kunstvorm. Het is belangrijk dat de defenitie van het hedendaagse circus niet verbreedt wordt, maar dat die net smaller en concreter wordt gemaakt. In deze zoektocht stoten critici onmiddellijk op de afwezigheid van een specifiek kritisch vocabulaire. We hebben het gevoel dat het ons ontbreekt aan 'tools' voor de analyse van circusvoorstellingen in hun specificiteit, met tot gevolg dat zij vaak worden begrepen en beleefd met theater- of dansogen. Termen als dramaturgie, choreografie en (theatrale) semantische analysekaders kunnen bijzonder hulpzaam zijn in het begrijpen en waarderen van een circusvoorstelling, maar tegelijk laten zij ook een ganse reeks codes en dialectieken in de piste buiten beschouwing. Net omdat circus eerder wordt 'beleefd' dan 'begrepen' kan het boeiend zijn om de analyse van deze kunstvorm meer toe te spitsen op de ervaring van de toeschouwer. Circus heeft een belangrijke rol te vervullen in een maatschappij die steeds globaler, virtueel en individualistischer wordt. Een goede circusvoorstelling biedt ons fragmenten van tastbare communicatie en gedeelde intimiteit. In die zin is het circus een ritueel dat het gedeelde, viscerale leven bevestigt doorheen een fysieke uitdaging van de dood. In die zin is circus cathartisch net zoals de Griekse tragedie dat was. In die zin creëert circus gemeenschap en verbindt zij elk van ons, al was het maar voor enkele seconden, met het dier in ons en de mens naast ons op de tribune. Hoe kunnen we, semantisch gezien, die magische ervaring van het circus verklaren of analyseren? Hoe wordt beweging gerelateerd aan de de communicatie van betekenis en emoties bij de toeschouwer? Cruciaal in circus is ook de panoptische visie van de toeschouwer en de all-around exposure van de artiesten. Wat gebeurt er wanneer circus steeds vaker in een rechthoekige doos, traditioneel het rijk van de tekst, wordt opgevoerd?*

*Wanneer we de analyse van een circusvoorstelling op die manier zouden kunnen aanpakken, dan hoeft de criticus plots geen expert meer te zijn in elk van de verschillende circusdisciplines. Hier verschijnt een andere criticus, wiens activiteit misschien dicht bij de rol van de dramaturg en de filosoof ligt. Hun kritische kompassen vertrekken immers niet van de aan- of afwezigheid van een heldere defenitie of geschiedenis. Want misschien moet het omgekeerd: misschien is het net doorheen het kijken en het schrijven, het graven en opnieuw beschrijven dat er zich fragmenten van een defenitie zullen aandienen en dat de geschiedenis als een aanéenschakeling van leemtes kan gereconstrueerd worden. Misschien is de taak van een criticus die achter een actuele kunstvorm aanrent die van een hedendaagse archeoloog: graven in het heden.*



# To C or not to C? Circus Delicacies

## Να τσι κανείς ή να μην τσι. Τσι-ρολιχουδιές

Article by **Christos Polymenakos**

As it had been many years since I last attended a circus performance, the images of smelly, wild yet worn out animals and flashy dressed up acrobats, clowns and animators, doing silly things were for a long time my prevalent circus impressions. Then going through the portfolios of some companies applying for funding to the Greek State Subsidies for Dance committee (National Centre for Theatre and Dance), it was quite obvious they would elsewhere be officially acknowledged as contemporary circus companies.

Luckily, it seems that besides Britney Spears' new promo tour, the world is experiencing another circus revival I admit I was not fully aware of, or at least not to the extent revealed during this most informative residency held in Paris by Hors les murs.

As a dance editor within the goals of the residency, it was inevitable not to start analyzing what contemporary circus is, how can one approach it and create a communication platform. Typical questions arose, such as "do we need special critical tools for the analysis of contemporary circus? What is its relation to other contemporary art forms/genres? Why is it that contemporary circus has become so hot today?"

To begin with, I strongly believe that an art form is better understood when one is aware of its history, aesthetics, practices, even production conditions. In addition to this previous, it is of assistance if you are aware of the social context in which it is embedded both in local and global scale. Knowledge and previous experience of scientific approaches for other art fields can then join forces with the specified codification towards a better understanding.

Circus is preoccupied with defiance: defying physical and current moral boundaries. This argument reoccurred very often in our discussions with the artists participating and/or directing the contemporary circus performances we attended during the residency, and of course among us. This provocation is related to the *mise en scene*, but also to an aura established through the years, by companies touring with their *chapiteaux*.

Illusion is another characteristic strongly connected to circus. What you see is what you get, but you appreciate it more when you don't get it. Surprise, excellence, mystery, a veil you just give up trying to lift after a point and merely accept that you are there to experience whatever the cast provides you with. Interaction might be encouraged, but in very clearly defined ways.

Specialization is another powerful element in circus performances. This might sound too obvious a comment to make. However, visits to circus schools and informal conferences with circus artists and of course their performances, pointed this out, loud and clear. Not all acrobats use the same equipment or perform the same tasks, not all clowns perform all the clown characters, not even in the same way. Whether in relevance to training, performance or concerning the perfection of performance tools and their applications to a new level, specialization remains a key word.

Another approach to specialization is that of the study of the performance space: by this I am referring to a certain visual economy which is build in order to draw the spectators' attention to very specific areas of ongoing action, even while speech is used in another part of the stage; one could think that listening to something while watching something concurrent does not prove problematic. At the same time, it might even be considered as a

*Μιας και πάνε πολλά χρόνια από την τελευταία φορά που παρακολούθησα παράσταση τσίρκου, οι εικόνες βρωμερών, μαδημένων, άγριων μεν αλλά καταπονημένων ζώων, φανταχτερά ντυμένων ακροβατών, κλόουν και παρουσιαστών που κάνουν ανόητα πράγματα, ήταν για πολύ καιρό οι εντυπώσεις που είχα για το τσίρκο. Μελετώντας ωστόσο τους φακέλους των προτάσεων που είχαν υποβάλει προς επιχορήγηση στον τομέα Χορού του Εθνικού Κέντρου Θεάτρου και Χορού κάποιες ομάδες, ήταν σαφές ότι σε άλλα μέρη θα ήταν επίσημα αναγνωρισμένες ως ομάδες σύγχρονου τσίρκου.*

*Ευτυχώς, εκτός από τη νέα προωθητική περιοδεία της Britney Spears, ο κόσμος βιώνει και μια διαφορετική μόδα που σχετίζεται με το τσίρκο και δεν την γνώριζα, τουλάχιστον στο μέγεθος που μου αποκαλύφθηκε κατά τη διάρκεια αυτής της αρκούντως ενημερωτικής φιλοξενίας κριτικών χορού στο Παρίσι, μια διοργάνωση του Hors les murs.*

*Με την ιδιότητα του δημοσιογράφου χορού χορού και εντός του πλαισίου των στόχων αυτής της φιλοξενίας, ήταν αναπόφευκτο να αρχίσω να αναλύω τι είναι το σύγχρονο τσίρκο, πως μπορεί κανείς να το προσεγγίσει και να δημιουργήσει μια πλατφόρμα επικουρωτικής γύρω από αυτό. Ανέκνυψαν ερωτήματα, όπως "χρειάζομαστε ειδικά εργαλεία για να αναλύσουμε το σύγχρονο τσίρκο; Ποια η σχέση του με άλλες μορφές και είδη σύγχρονης τέχνης; Γιατί γίνεται τόσο της μόδας το σύγχρονο τσίρκο σήμερα;"*

*Καταρχήν, πιστεύω ότι μια μορφή τέχνης μπορεί να την καταλάβει κανείς καλύτερα όταν γνωρίζει την ιστορία, την αισθητική, τις πρακτικές, ακόμη και τις συνθήκες παραγωγής της. Επιπλέον, βοηθά να έχει κανείς υπόψη του το κοινωνικό πλαίσιο στο οποίο εντάσσεται, σε τοπική και οικονομική κλίμακα. Οι γνώσεις, ανάλογες εμπειρίες και επιστημονικές προσεγγίσεις σχετικές με άλλα καλλιτεχνικά είδη μπορούν τότε να συνδυαστούν με την εξειδικευμένη κωδικοποίηση για να κατανοήσει κανείς καλύτερα το εν λόγω είδος.*

*Το τσίρκο αφηφά. Αψηφά τα σωματικά όρια, καθώς και αυτά της εκάστοτε τρέχουσας ηθικής. Αυτό το επιχειρήμα επανερχόταν σταθερά στις συζητήσεις που είχαμε με τους καλλιτέχνες που συμμετείχαν ή/και σκηνοθετούσαν τις παραστάσεις που παρακολούθησαμε κατά τη διάρκεια της ειδικής φιλοξενίας, όπως άλλωστε και μεταξύ μας. Η πρόκληση αυτή προδοτείται από όσα διαδραματίζονται στη σκηνή του τσίρκου, αλλά και από την αύρα που έχουν δημιουργήσει με τα χρόνια οι ομάδες που περιοδεύουν με τις σκηνές τους.*

*Η οπτική απάτη είναι ένα ακόμη χαρακτηριστικό που συνδέεται στενά με την τέχνη του τσίρκου. Αυτό που βλέπεις είναι αυτό που συμβαίνει αλλά το εκτιμάς ακόμη περισσότερο όταν δεν καταλαβαίνεις πως γίνεται. Εκπληξη, υπεροχή, αριότητα, μυστήριο. Πέπλο που από ένα σημείο και μετά δεν προσπαθείς να σηκώσεις αποδέχεσαι ότι βρίσκεσαι εκεί για να βιώσεις ό,τι έχουν να σου προσφέρουν οι συντελεστές. Η συμμετοχή και η διάδραση μπορεί να ενθαρρύνονται κάποιες φορές, αλλά είναι ξεκάθαρα ορισμένες.*

*Η εξειδίκευση είναι ένα άλλο ισχυρό γνώρισμα των παραστάσεων τσίρκου. Και αν ακούγεται πολύ προφανές το σχόλιο, θα πρέπει να υπογραμμίσω ότι οι επισκέψεις μας σε σχολές τσίρκου και οι συνομιλίες μας με τους καλλιτέχνες που βλέπαμε στη σκηνή, το*

desired effect to watch somebody else going off stage or preparing themselves for the next action.

Circus venues are sometimes the ones also used for other performances – conventional or experimental – still the use of them can be so different it need not be a classical tent to get 'the circus feeling'. This is related to the circus skills, tools and conventions applied during the performance (acrobatics, juggling, clownery, trapeze, trampoline, illusion and the defiance of physical boundaries to name some).

Now, let's move on to other art forms in relation to circus. As with all performing arts, circus performances can involve every means of artistic expression to serve their causes. This may be in an already existing mode, or new approaches created bearing in mind specific aesthetic and production needs. In cases of countries with stronger circus background (artistic, educational, infrastructural) and more generous support of production means like France, circus has proved to become the starting point for scientific/performance research like in the case of the Vibrations installation, Clément Debailleul and Raphaël Navarro of the 14:20 company are working on.

So, why now all this talk about 'the circus comeback'? Was it ever away? Is it a local phenomenon? Is it, if I may, 'ok' for circus to make a comeback? How are things in terms of infrastructural support? Should the artist bother to identify their works as traditional, contemporary or other circus? How does circus cope with becoming less of a family business and more into new media and transdisciplinarity?

Circus practices were never away. Even when official circus productions went through a low attendance period, tv and other mass consumption shows – varying in different countries from night clubs to children's parties – have always welcomed circus practitioners. Theatre and dance productions have very often borrowed conventions, techniques/skills and of course performers from the field of circus.

Lack of fear, laughter, even at times harsh things happening before our eyes, illusion, impressive outfits, extreme physical skills performed by half naked bodies and simple storylines have always been a catch for the audience. Can it be that those are just the reasons for the audience's and state's attention to be once again drawn back to the circus field? I mean, after all, there is a lot of circus action going outside the chapiteaux and into the theatres, and a lot of sophisticated, maybe even conceptual circus performances touring.

Accessibility might be the key word here. By accessibility I mean how luring a production is to a broader audience, to substantial state or private funding, to theorists, practitioners and programmers. And by how, I mean both to what extent and in what ways.

Market is not the starting point here. It would be silly to claim so in times when a global financial crisis has entered our private areas. It is not silly however to claim that elements thriving in circus as the ones described just above, are most sought after when doomsday feels that close. Circus has this dark and glittering aura amplified by the fact that should a fatal accident occur before our eyes, the next act will start immediately washing away the pain before we go back to our bills and loans.

It is what people feel like watching, what the state supports for its own reasons, what artists and scientists pick up next to experiment with, which territories are the newest available to theorists and programmers to claim as their own kingdoms.

There is a thought that the French are investing more money on circus ever since they thought they needed to export a non-verbal product, now that their language is for many reasons not considered among the top three anymore. Would it have been circus if there was no such tradition, accessibility and actual evolution potential? Probably not.

The fact that other relevant forms of artistic expression like dance, new media, theatre and performance have already opened up a

καθιστούν απολύτως σαφές και σημαντικό. Δεν χρησιμοποιούν όλοι οι ακροβάτες τα ίδια όργανα, ούτε εκτελούν με τον ίδιο τρόπο τις κινήσεις. Όλοι οι κλόουν δεν παίζουν όλους τους χαρακτήρες κλόουν που υπάρχουν και σίγουρα όχι με τον ίδιο τρόπο. Από την εκπαίδευση ως την ερμηνεία και είτε αφορά στην τελειοποίηση ή τη νέα προσέγγιση στα παραστατικά τους εργαλεία και τις εφαρμογές τους, η εξειδίκευση παραμένει λέξη κλειδί.

Μια άλλη προσέγγιση της εξειδίκευσης είναι αυτή της εστίασης. Αναφέρομαι στη σκηνική οικονομία που οδηγεί την προσοχή του θεατή σε συγκεκριμένες περιοχές των δρωμένων, ακόμη και όταν χρησιμοποιείται ο λόγος και θα μπορούσε να σκεφτεί κανείς ότι μπορεί να ακούει κάτι και να βλέπει κάτι άλλο. Παράλληλα βέβαια, είναι πιθανό να μη δημιουργείται κανένα πρόβλημα αν βλέπουμε κάποιον να βγαίνει από τη σκηνή ή να προετοιμάζεται για την επόμενη δράση.

Οι χώροι που φιλοξενούν παραστάσεις τσίρκου είναι συχνά οι ίδιοι που φιλοξενούν και άλλες παραστάσεις, συμβατικές ή πειραματικές. Η χρήση τους ωστόσο είναι τόσο διαφορετική που δεν χρειάζεται να μπει κανείς σε μια κλασική σκηνή τσίρκου για να έχει την "αίσθηση του τσίρκου". Αυτό οφείλεται στις ειδικές δεξιότητες, τα όργανα και τις συμβάσεις που χαρακτηρίζουν τις παραστάσεις όπως τα ακροβατικά, ο χειρισμός αντικειμένων, η κλοουνερί, το τραπέζιο, το τραμπολίνο, η οπτική απάτη και η υπέρβαση των σωματικών ορίων για να αναφερθώ σε μερικά.

Ας προχωρήσουμε τώρα στη σχέση άλλων μορφών τέχνης με αυτήν του τσίρκου. Όπως και σε όλες τις παραστασιακές τέχνες, έτσι και στην περίπτωση του τσίρκου, κάθε τρόπος και μέσο καλλιτεχνικής έκφρασης μπορεί να ενταχθεί κατά τρόπο τέτοιο που εξυπηρετεί τις ανάγκες της παράστασης. Ο τρόπος μπορεί να είναι ήδη γνωστός, ή να δημιουργηθούν νέες προσεγγίσεις και εφαρμογές εξαιτίας των ειδικών απαιτήσεων του έργου, είτε αυτές είναι αισθητικές, είτε πρακτικές. Στις περιπτώσεις χωρών με ισχυρότερο υπόβαθρο στην τέχνη του τσίρκου (καλλιτεχνικό, εκπαιδευτικό, υποδομών) και πιο γενναιόδωρης υποστήριξης των επιμέρους στοιχείων της παραγωγής, όπως η Γαλλία, το τσίρκο αναδείχθηκε σε αφετηρία επιστημονικής και παραστασιακής έρευνας. Χαρακτηριστικό παράδειγμα η συνεργασία του Φιλίπ Ντεκουφλέ όπως στην περίπτωση της εγκατάστασης Vibrations για την οποία συνεργάζονται οι Clément Debailleul και Raphaël Navarro της ομάδας 14:20 Γιατί λοιπόν όλες αυτές οι συζητήσεις για "την επιστροφή του τσίρκου"; Έφυγε ποτέ; Είναι τοπικό φαινόμενο; "Επιτρέπεται" στο τσίρκο να κάνει "επιστροφή"; Θα έπρεπε ο καλλιτέχνης να προβληματίζεται πριν δηλώσει το έργο του ως παράσταση παραδοσιακού, σύγχρονου ή άλλου τσίρκου; Πώς επηρεάζεται το ίδιο το τσίρκο που είναι ολοένα λιγότερο οικογενειακή επιχείρηση και εισάγονται σε αυτό όλο και πιο πολλά στοιχεία των νέων μέσων και των υβριδικών μορφών τέχνης;

Οι πρακτικές του τσίρκου δεν έφυγαν ποτέ από το προσκήνιο. Ακόμη και όταν οι επίσημα αναγνωρισμένες ως παραγωγές τσίρκου πέρασαν περίοδο ύφεσης, η τηλεόραση και άλλα θέματα μαζικής κατανάλωσης που σε διαφορετικές χώρες ποικίλουν από νυχτερινά κέντρα ως παιδικά πάρτι, φιλοξενούσαν πάντοτε καλλιτέχνες του τσίρκου. Θεατρικές και χορευτικές παραστάσεις πολύ συχνά δανείστηκαν συμβάσεις, τεχνικές και δεξιότητες των τσίρκου και φυσικά ερμηνευτές από τον χώρο αυτόν.

Η έλλειψη φόβου, το γέλιο ακόμη και σε στιγμές κατά τις οποίες σκληρά γεγονότα διαδραματίζονται μπροστά στα μάτια μας, οπτικές απάτες, εντυπωσιακά κοστούμια, ακραία σωματικά επιτεύγματα εκτελεσμένα από ημίγυμνα κορμά και απλές ιστορίες είναι στοιχεία που πάντοτε έλκνυαν το κοινό. Είναι δυνατόν αυτά να είναι οι μόνοι λόγοι που θα τραβήξουν και πάλι το ενδιαφέρον του κοινού στο τσίρκο; Θέλω να πω ότι υπάρχει δραστηριότητα στο πεδίο του τσίρκου τόσο έξω από την κλασική τέντα όσο και στα θέατρα, καθώς επίσης πολλές είναι οι παραστάσεις τσίρκου που θα μπορούσε να ονομάσει κανείς εννοιολογικές/ενοιακές και



big fan of selections and approaches, seems to have left the door for circus half open, when in past years it had been slapped in the face calling it dated and decadent, dead and buried. I found it very interesting that the director of *Warm* – presented in La Villette during the residency – insisted on calling his piece a theatre piece and not a circus piece. It felt circus was denounced even though it offered him a chance to present another approach of a theatre piece, regardless of my personal opinion on the specific production. Which brings us again to the ever recurring issues of: "What is circus?", "What are the criteria to estimate its artistic value?", "When is one entitled to present his/her work within the context and financial support provided by state or private sponsors to circus research or presentation infrastructure?" Haven't we really been there? Haven't we done that for other art forms? It doesn't matter if you cannot milk rice. In fact when you cannot deal with lactose and you are allergic to soy, rice milk can be great. If you mix it with whichever cola, you might end up nauseated, but you can have it with your serial in the morning and get the catharsis most sought in so many art productions.

On that note I would have to make clear I feel respect for all well crafted productions, yet I admit I prefer the ones that make the most of their accessibility to take us a step forward even by building arguments against it, rather than those that restrain ideas and ways of expression within arm's length. And as much as this can vary among different audiences, a rotten sandwich is still not considered edible, regardless of containing either exotic delicacies or greasy, fast food French fries.

περιοδεύουν αυτήν τη στιγμή.

Προσβασιμότητα είναι η λέξη κλειδί εν προκειμένω. Εννοώ το πόσο δελεαστική είναι μια παραγωγή στο ευρύτερο κοινό, στην ουσιαστική κρατική ή ιδιωτική χρηματοδότηση, στους θεωρητικούς, τους επαγγελματίες και τους προγραμματιστές. Και λέγοντας "πόσο", εννοώ εξίσου σε ποιον βαθμό αλλά και με ποιον τρόπο.

Η αγορά δεν είναι η αρχή σε αυτήν την περίπτωση. Θα ήταν ανόητο να ισχυριστούμε κάτι τέτοιο σε περιόδους που η παγκόσμια οικονομική κρίση έχει μπει βαθιά στη ζωή μας. Δεν είναι ανόητο ωστόσο να ισχυριστούμε ότι στοιχεία που ενδοκιμούν στο τσίρκο, όπως αυτά που ανέφερα πιο πάνω, ο κόσμος τα αναζητά πολύ όταν αισθάνεται το τέλος του κόσμου τόσο κοντά. Το τσίρκο έχει αυτήν τη σκοτεινή και λαμπερή αύρα που την ενισχύει το γεγονός ότι ακόμη και αν ένα θανάσιμο ατύχημα συμβεί μπροστά στα μάτια μας, το επόμενο νούμερο θα αρχίσει αμέσως για να ξεπλύνει τα δάκρυα πριν επιστρέψουμε στους λογαριασμούς και τα δάνειά μας. Η αρχή είναι αυτό που οι άνθρωποι νιώθουν ότι θέλουν να βλέπουν, αυτό που η πολιτεία για τους δικούς της λόγους υποστηρίζει, αυτό που καλλιτέχνες και επιστήμονες διαλέγουν για να πειραματιστούν, οι νέες περιοχές που διατίθενται σε θεωρητικούς και προγραμματιστές για να ανακηρύξουν ως βασιλείό τους.

Υπάρχει η σκέψη ότι οι Γάλλοι επενδύουν περισσότερα χρήματα στο τσίρκο από τη στιγμή που αποφάσισαν ότι χρειάζονται να εξάγουν ένα άλλο, μη λεκτικό προϊόν, τώρα που η γλώσσα τους για πολλούς λόγους δεν συμπεριλαμβάνεται στο top 3. Θα ήταν το τσίρκο η επιλογή τους αν δεν υπήρχε τέτοια παράδοση, προσβασιμότητα και δυνατότητα εξέλιξης; Μάλλον όχι.

Το γεγονός ότι άλλες σχετιζόμενες μορφές καλλιτεχνικής έκφρασης όπως ο χορός, τα νέα μέσα, το θέατρο και η performance έχουν ήδη ξεδιπλώσει μια μεγάλη βεντάλια από επιλογές και προσεγγίσεις/προτάσεις, φαίνεται πως έχει αφήσει την πόρτα για το τσίρκο μισάνοιχτη, ενώ τα προηγούμενα χρόνια τον την έκλειναν κατάμουτρα, αποκαλώντας το ξεπερασμένο και παρακμάζον, πεθαμένο και ξεχασμένο. Βρήκα πολύ ενδιαφέρον το ότι ο σκηνοθέτης του *Warm* – παρουσιάστηκε στη Βιλέτ κατά τη διάρκεια της ειδικής φιλοξενίας- επέμενε να αποκαλεί την παράσταση του θεατρική και όχι τσίρκο. Ένωθε κανείς ότι απαρνούνταν το τσίρκο τη στιγμή που του επέτρεπε να παρουσιάσει μια διαφορετική προσέγγιση μιας θεατρικής παράστασης, ανεξάρτητα από την προσωπική μου γνώμη για τη συγκεκριμένη παραγωγή.

Που μας φέρνει και πάλι αντιμέτωπους με τα σταθερά παρόντα ερωτήματα: "Τι είναι τσίρκο; Ποια τα κριτήρια για την αποτίμηση της καλλιτεχνικής του αξίας; Πότε έχει κανείς το δικαίωμα να παρουσιάσει το έργο του εντός του συγκεκριμένου και της οικονομικής υποστήριξης που παρέχουν οι ιδιώτες ή η πολιτεία στις υποδομές για την έρευνα και την παρουσίαση έργων τσίρκου; Μα δεν τα έχουμε ξαναζητήσει αυτά με τις άλλες μορφές τέχνης; Δεν έχει σημασία αν δεν μπορείς να αρμέξεις το ρύζι. Μάλιστα αν δεν τα βγάζεις πέρα με τη λακτόζη και είσαι αλλεργικός στη σόγια, το γάλα από ρύζι μπορεί να είναι εξαιρετικό. Αν το ανακατέψεις με ...cola, μπορεί να σου ανακατέψει το στομάχι, αλλά μπορείς να το φας με δημητριακά το πρωί και να έχεις την κάθαρση που τόσο ψάχνουμε σε πλείστα όσα έργα τέχνης.

Σε αυτό το σημείο θα πρέπει να ξεκαθαρίσω ότι τρέφω σεβασμό για όλες τις καλοφτιαγμένες παραγωγές. Παραδέχομαι ωστόσο ότι προτιμώ εκείνες που αξιοποιούν την προσβασιμότητα τους στο έπακρο για να μας πάνε ένα βήμα πιο πέρα, ακόμη και αν το κάνουμε για να επιχειρηματολογήσουμε ρητά εναντίον τους και σίγουρα όχι εκείνες που περιορίζουν τις ιδέες και τους τρόπους έκφρασης μόνο μέχρι εκεί που ήδη φτάνουμε. Και όσο και αν αυτό διαφοροποιείται ανάλογα με το κοινό, ένα σάπιο σάντουιτς εξακολουθεί να μη θεωρείται φαγώσιμο, ανεξάρτητα από το αν περιέχει εξωτικές λιχουδιές ή λιγδιάρικες τηγανιτές πατάτες fast food.

# On Contemporary Circus and Performance Criticism

## *Nykysirkuksesta ja esityskritiikistä*

Article by **Tomi Purovaara**

Contemporary circus came into being as a result of developments in cirque nouveau at the end of the 1990s at the crossroads of circus and other performing art genres. Contemporary circus has fragmented in the 21st century into ever-smaller fields in which different artists even define the genre in different ways. For that reason the artists' creative processes and the results, i.e. the performances, are not easy to evaluate.

What am I writing about when I write about contemporary circus?

A large cultural change which affected more than the mere external features of the performances lies behind the contemporary circus phenomenon. Circus's own internal changes with regards to e.g. training, production models, genre techniques, the status of artists, the structure and aesthetics of the performances, research and public funding models are all a part of the development. Contemporary circus hasn't evolved in a vacuum, and the changes that have happened around it – the development of other (performing) arts and different countries' (and continents') social, political and cultural trajectories – have been just as important for circus.

So by now, circus now looks different in each country. A circus critic today encounters a whole spectrum of 'national' contemporary circuses in his work: the kind of standardized circus product that we became accustomed to through traditional circus no longer exists.

But how can we evaluate contemporary circus performances which don't just reflect the artist's perspective, but also the country and culture that the work was created in? Like its predecessors, contemporary circus is a very international art form which has open borders both geographically and also with regards to inter-art cooperation. How much does the critic have to know, and what can he write about?

On Finnish contemporary circus

The roots of new circus lie in 1970s France and the USA, but in Finland they only reach back to the 1990s: the country's first contemporary circus group, Circo Aereo, was formed in 1996. And as we know, that was the same year that Le cri du chameleon, directed by the French contemporary circus choreographer Josef Nadji, was created, starting the era of French contemporary circus.

The reasons that developments took a leap in Finland were quite different from the reasons in France. The basic mechanism for the development of Finnish contemporary circus was the youth circus movement starting in the 1970s, the international phenomenon of new juggling that began in the 1980s, and a change in State culture politics.

The recognition of circus art in Finland happened through children's and youth's amateur circus activities when circus training became a part of the basic art education system in 1995. The Arts Council's Circus Art Section was established in 2000, mainly due to the efforts of youth circus pioneers. Youth circuses now exist in 35 cities, and there are around 3,500 students in

*Nykysirkus syntyi cirque nouveaun kehityksen tuloksena 1990-luvun loppupuolella sirkuksen ja muiden esittävän taiteen lajien risteyskohdassa. 2000-luvun aikana nykysirkus on pirstoutunut yhä pienemmiksi osa-alueiksi, joissa lajitteyppin määritelmäkin voi vaihdella jopa kunkin taiteilijan mukaan. Siksi myöskään taiteilijoiden luovien prosessien ja niiden tulosten, esitysten, arvioiminen ei ole ongelmatonta.*

*Mistä kirjoitan kun kirjoitan nykysirkuksesta?*

*Nykysirkusilmion takana on laaja kulttuurinen muutos, joka ei pysähdy vain esitysten ulkoisten tunnusmerkkien muutoksiin. Sirkuksen omat sisäiset muutokset esimerkiksi koulutuksessa, tuotantomallissa, lajitekniikassa, taiteilijan asemassa, esityksen rakenteessa ja estetiikassa, tutkimuksessa ja julkisissa tukimuodoissa ovat osa kehitystä. Koska nykysirkuskaan ei kehity tyhjiössä, ovat sirkukselle yhtä tärkeitä ne muutokset, joita on tapahtunut sen ympärillä: muissa (esittävän) taiteen lajeissa, sekä eri maiden (ja maanosien) yhteiskunnallisissa, poliittisissa ja kulttuurisissa kehityskuluissa.*

*Niinpä tämän päivän sirkus näyttää kussakin maassa omanlaiseltaan. Sirkuskriitikko kohtaa nykyään työssään kokonaisen "kansallisten" nykysirkusten kirjon, ei enää standardisoitua sirkustuotetta, johon perinteinen sirkus meidät totutti.*

*Mutta miten voimme arvioida nykysirkusesityksiä, jotka heijastelevat paitsi kunkin taiteilijan näkemyksiä, myös teoksen syntymämaata ja kulttuuria? Nykysirkus jatkaa edeltäjiensä tavoin hyvin kansainvälisenä taidemuotona, rajat ovat avoinna niin maantieteellisesti kuin eri taiteiden välillä. Kuinka paljon kriitikon pitää tietää, ja mistä hän voi kirjoittaa?*

*Suomen nykysirkuksesta*

*Uuden sirkuksen juuret löytyvät 1970-luvun Ranskasta ja Yhdysvalloista, mutta Suomessa sirkuksen taiteellinen kehitys vasta 1990-luvulla: maan ensimmäinen nykysirkusryhmä Circo Aereo perustettiin vuonna 1996. Samana vuonna käynnistyi ranskalaisen nykysirkuksen ajanlasku koreografi Josef Nadjin ohjaaman Le cri du chameleon -esityksen syntyhetkenä.*

*Suomessa sirkuksen uuden kehityshyppäyksen syyt olivat aivan toiset kuin muun maassa Ranskassa. Suomalaisen nykysirkuksen kehittymisen mekanismin pohjana olivat jo 1970-luvulla alkanut nuorisosirkusten kehittymisen liike, uuden jongleerauksen 1980-luvulla käynnistynyt kansainvälinen ilmiö sekä valtion muutoksessa oleva kulttuuripolitiikka.*

*Sirkustaiteen "tunnustaminen" Suomessa tapahtui lasten ja nuorten sirkusharrastustoiminnan kautta kun sirkusopetus otettiin mukaan taiteen perusopetusjärjestelmään vuonna 1995. Arts Counciliin sirkustaidejaosto perustettiin vuonna 2000, lähinnä nuorisosirkuksen pioneerien toimesta. Nykyisin nuorisosirkuksia toimii 35 paikkakunnalla, oppilaita on yhteensä noin 3500. Monet nuorisosirkuksista noudattavat Opetusministeriön vahvistamaa tavoitteellista opetussuunnitelmaa, toimien samalla valmistavana kouluna Suomessa toimiville kahdelle ammattilaisten sirkuskoululle, sekä väylänä maailman huippusirkuskouluihin. Nykysirkuksen ensimmäiset suomalaistaiteilijat astuivat*

total. Many youth circuses follow the training programme that has been approved by the Ministry of Education and prepare their students for the two Finnish vocational circus schools, as well as leading international circus schools.

Contemporary circus's first Finnish artists became known through juggling. Young jugglers (e.g. Jani Nuutinen, Maksim Komaro and Ville Walo) took up circus as a hobby in youth circus and circus summer camps. When the new wave of international juggling arrived in Finland at the beginning of the 1990s, this resulted in the founding of the first groups, 5-3-1 Helsinki New Juggling Festival which began in 1998, and the production of the Peapot experimental juggling training videos, all of which began to put Finland on the contemporary circus map. The field's structures began to be developed after 2002 when Cirko – Center for New Circus was founded. The Finnish Circus Information Centre was founded in 2006 to gather and disseminate information about activities in the whole circus field, and to coordinate and promote the development. Contemporary circus received its first public production support grant in 2004, and State support for groups began in 2006. In 2009 the State budget included funding that was for the first time specifically ear-marked for the promotion of contemporary circus.

### Developing contemporary circus as a fuel for critics

When we were founding Cirko – Center for New Circus in 2002, we wanted to raise the status of contemporary circus in Finland and increase people's respect for it. One of the central principles that were written down in our plan was maximum publicity. At that time contemporary circus went unnoticed in Finland – only a few small groups were into it. Performances received mixed reviews in the press and were usually lumped in together with theatre critiques. The art form lacked a tradition, a written history, and a definition. Now, seven years later, we have presented over 60 different Finnish and foreign contemporary circus productions to Helsinki audiences and critics, published 4 books, arranged lecture and discussion series, and created a strong environment for contemporary circus to work in.

The field still has plenty room to grow, but it has become a lot more visible. According to statistics that the Information Centre compiled, in 2008 there were 13 Finnish contemporary circus groups who performed a total of 422 times to around 59,000 spectators. This category includes international performances (approx. 140), which were given in 13 different countries to around 22,000 spectators. Professional groups give around 20 premieres annually. While it is possible to see performances outside the capital in a few of the larger university cities, contemporary circus is not yet accessible to the entire population. Circus reviews feature in the largest newspapers, written by 5 or 6 freelance critics, and performance reviews and articles about contemporary circus feature in journals which specialize in theatre and dance. Radio and television cover the subject monthly. The circus field's own media outlet is currently only the youth circus union's magazine, which is published for professionals and amateurs alike.

Contemporary circus criticism has grown along with the field. Archaos's *Metal Clown*, which visited Helsinki in 1992, woke up writers and readers. As Finnish groups developed, a few dance critics acquainted themselves with circus and presented it to readers as part of the performing arts. The country's leading newspaper's dance and circus critic now writes clearly under a circus heading, but only five years ago he had to start every review by explaining what contemporary circus was. Things are different now, however: the phenomenon and the art field are well known, and the critic can concentrate on reviewing the performance.



Festival "Solstice" - Le Sort du dedans - Baro d'Evel - Théâtre Firmin Gémier © Philippe Laureçon

*esiin nimenomaan jongleerauksen kautta. Nuoret jonglöörit (mm. Maksim Komaro ja Ville Walo) olivat aloittaneet sirkusharrastuksensa nuorisosirkuksessa ja sirkuksen kesäleireillä. Kun jongleerauksen kansainvälinen uudistusliike tavoitti Suomen 1990-luvun alkupuolella, oli tuloksena ensimmäisten ryhmien perustaminen, vuonna 1998 aloittanut 5-3-1 Helsinki New Juggling Festival sekä kokeellisen jongleerauksen Peapot -opetusvideoiden tuottaminen, jotka kaikki yhdessä alkoivat asettaa Suomea nykysirkuksen kartalle. Alan rakenteet alkoivat kehittyä vuoden 2002 jälkeen, Cirko – Uuden Sirkuksen Keskusten käynnistettyä toimintansa. Sirkuksen tiedotuskeskus perustettiin vuonna 2006 kokoamaan ja levittämään tietoa koko sirkusalan toiminnasta sekä koordinoimaan ja edistämään alan kehittämistä. Ensimmäiset valtion produktiotuet nykysirkukselle jaettiin 2004, ryhmien valtiontuki käynnistyi 2006, vuoden 2009 valtion budjettiin kirjattiin ensimmäistä kertaa oma, nykysirkuksen edistämiseen määritelty kulukohtansa (budjet line?).*

*Kehittyvä nykysirkuskenttä kritiikin polttoaineena*  
*Perustaessamme talvella 2002 Cirko – Uuden Sirkuksen Keskusta halusimme nostaa nykysirkuksen taidemuodon asemaa ja arvostusta Suomessa. Yksi suunnitelmaamme kirjausta keskeisistä periaatteista oli maksimaalisen julkisuuden takaaminen. Tuohon aikaan nykysirkus oli Suomessa aivan vailla huomiota, muutaman pienen ryhmän tekemisten varassa. Esityksiä arvioitiin päivälehdissä vaihtelevasti, yleensä teatteriesityskritiikkien joukossa. Taidemuodolta puuttui perinne, kirjoitettu historia, määritelmä. Ja tätä kautta myös esityskritiikin perusta oli heikko, jotain oli siis tehtävä. Nyt, seitsemän vuotta myöhemmin olemme esitelleet Helsingin yleisölle ja kriitikoille yli*



## Problems and solutions in circus criticism

The problems of critics who evaluate circus performances in Finland are probably mainly the same as in other countries. Finnish-language information and research has only become available in recent years, and a critic certainly needs information to get to the core of contemporary circus, despite the fact that they are usually experts in dance or theatre. If one writes about circus, one needs to know its history and present situation in detail. As I stated in the beginning, contemporary circus has split circus tradition into small fragments, and different circus disciplines are reaching out in their own directions. Even though Europe is joining up, every contemporary circus country has its own identity, artistically as well as with regards to productions. The critic should be able to 'read' performances from these premises, place the performance he has witnessed in the context of European circus art, and evaluate its artistic content with regards to the historical development of the field.

So how is the evaluation of performances affected by the fact that contemporary circus is by definition a mix of different art forms? We live in a reality in which many artists have progressed in new directions from their circus roots and may simply define their work as 'a performance' without any references to a more specific performing art genre. And it's certainly true that e.g. Frenchman Johann Le Guillerm's project has expanded from performance into installations, sculpture and research.

How should we proceed? Does a circus critic need specific kinds of tools or methods to evaluate contemporary circus, and where would he get them? I am assuming that the circus critic's development is fundamentally similar to the struggle that artists are involved in. An artist also has to define her own actions in relation to history and different kinds of contemporary themes. At his best, a critic can act as an echo and sparring partner for the artist's aspirations and this requires that they speak and understand the same language.

So we all need definitions, information and understanding. Dialogue and European networking provide solutions for the critic, as I got to experience in June 2009 in Paris at residency for critics gathering. Information about development in different countries and examples of different types of performance can be efficiently disseminated in concrete workshops and seminars.

*60 eri nyky sirkusproduktiota, julkaisseet neljä kirjaa, järjestäneet luento- ja keskustelutarjoja, luoneet nyky sirkukselle vahvan toimintaympäristön.*

*Suuren suuri ei ala ole edelleenkään, mutta näkyväksi se on tullut. Tiedotuskeskuksen keräämissä esitystilastoissa oli vuonna 2008 kolmelta suomalaiselta nyky sirkusryhmältä, jotka esiintyivät 422 kertaa yhteensä noin 59 000 katsojalle. Tähän lukuun sisältyvät kansainväliset esiintymiset, joita oli noin 140, 13 eri maassa, yhteensä 22 000 katsojalle. Ammattilaisryhmien ensi-iltoja on vuosittain parisenkymmentä. Esityksiä on mahdollista nähdä pääkaupunkiseudun lisäksi muutamissa suuremmissa yliopistokaupungeissa – koko kansan taidetta nyky sirkus ei vielä ole. Sirkuskritiikkiä suurimpiin päivälehtiin kirjoittaa arviolta 5-6 free lancer kritikkoo. Lisäksi nyky sirkuksesta kirjoitetaan esitysarvioita ja artikkeleita aikakauslehdissä, jotka ovat erikoistuneet teatteriin ja tanssiin. Radio- ja televisiojuttuja ilmiöstä tehdään kuukausittain. Sirkusalan toistaiseksi ainoa oma media on nuorisosirkusliiton julkaisema ammattilaisten ja harrastajien lehti.*

*Nyky sirkuskritiikki on kasvanut yhtä aikaa taiteenalan kanssa. Archaoksen Metal Clown herätti vuoden 1992 Helsingin vierailullaan kirjoittajat ja lukijat. Omien ryhmien kehittyessä useimmiten tanssin parista tulleet kritikat ovat tutustuneet sirkukseen ja esitelleet sitä lukijoille osana muuta esittävää taidetta. Maan johtavan päivälehdessä tanssi- ja sirkuskritikko kirjoittaa juttunsa itsestään selvästi sirkus-otsikon alla. Vielä 10 vuotta sitten hän joutui joka arvion alussa kertaamaan mitä nyky sirkus on. Nyt tilanne on toinen, ilmiö ja taiteenala on yleisölle tuttu, ja kritikko voi jo keskittyä varsinaiseen esityskritiikkiin.*

## Sirkuskritiikin ongelmia ja ratkaisuja

*Sirkusesityksiä Suomessa arvioivan kriitikon ongelmat lienevät pitkälti samoja kuin muissakin maissa. Suomen kielistä tietoa ja tutkimusta ei aivan viime vuosiin asti ole juuri ollut saatavilla. Ja tietoaan kritikko tarvitsee pystyäköön murtautumaan aikaisemmin itselleen tuttujen lajityyppien (esimerkiksi tanssi, teatteri) konventioiden läpi nyky sirkuksen ytimeen. Sirkuksesta kirjoittavan on tunnettava lajin historia ja nykytila, eikä vain yleisellä tasolla. Kuten alussa totesin, on nyky sirkus hajottanut sirkuksen perinteen erillisiin saarekkeisiin, joissa eri sirkuslajit*

Another very important thing is the dissemination of written information – circus research – and its distribution in different languages. Support for initiatives which enable the freest possible movement of artistic work in Europe are also important: the critic's understanding of different kinds of performances only grows through seeing and experiencing.

In Finland the Circus Information Centre began a series of workshops gathering future critics in spring 2009. The teachers and lecturers were more established critics as well as contemporary circus artists. The workshops included visiting performances, and students went through the analyses together. A lecture series in cooperation with the Theatre Research programme in Helsinki University's Institute for Art Research was also arranged in the spring. Workshops are felt to be important, and they will continue, and the university will start courses on circus research in autumn 2009. The amount of knowledge and understanding will therefore increase.

Another of the Information Centre's ways of engaging professional Finnish critics with circus is an annual recognition prize that will be awarded for the first time in February 2010. The Information Centre has invited the five most important circus critics to decide who gets the prize, and they will attend the most important performances for a year and thereby get a good picture of the field.

## Life after criticism?

It is an old truth that 'the private is public'. And this also seems to be the case from the point of view of circus criticism. In a small country like Finland a developing art field like contemporary circus needs all the support it can get. Therefore we started our project with the idea to promote all collaboration. We are moving forward through knowledge and the inspiration it can create. The role of the critic as a disseminator of information is one of the most important. As a conclusion, perhaps the contemporary circus critic's next step could be to gather all available knowledge of the situation of modern circus in his own country, and in his own language. By this he can take the step from being only a companion and become a strong defender of the young art field: playing clearly a more active role in the field of his national contemporary circus field linking together art, criticism and the development of the structures.

*kurkottavat omiin suuntiinsa. Ja vaikka Eurooppa yhdentyy, on jokaisella nykysirkusmaalla oma identiteettinsä, niin taiteellisesti kuin tuotannollisesti. Kriitikon olisi kyettävä "lukemaan" esityksiä näistä lähtöasetelmista lähtien, sijoitettava näkemänsä esitys Euroopan "taiteelliselle kartalle", sekä arvioimaan esityksen taiteellista sisältöä suhteessa alan kehityshistoriaan.*

*Entä miten esitysten arvioimiseen vaikuttaa nykysirkukseen olennaisesti kuuluva taiteiden välisyys? Elämmehän todellisuudessa, jossa monet taiteilijat ovat edenneet sirkusjuuriltaan aivan uusiin suuntiin, jossa he saattavat määritellä teoksensa pelkästään "esitykseksi", ilman viittauksia tarkempaan esittävän taiteen genreen. Ja onhan totta, että esimerkiksi ranskalaisen Johann le Guillermin projekti on laajentunut esittämisestä installaatioihin, kuvanveistoon ja tutkimukseen.*

*Miten pitäisi edetä: tarvitseeko sirkuskriitikko joitakin erityisiä työkaluja tai metodeja nykysirkusesityksen arvioimiseen, ja mistä niitä saisi? Luulena, että sirkuskritiikin kehittyminen on pohjimmiltaan samanlainen prosessi kuin se, missä taiteilijatkkin kamppailevat. Myös taiteilija joutuu määrittelemään oman tekemisensä suhteessa historiaan ja nykypäivän erilaisiin aineksiin. Parhaimmillaan kriitikko voi toimia kaikupohjana ja sparraajana taiteilijan pyrkimyksille. Ja tämä tietysti edellyttää sitä, että he puhuvat ja ymmärtävät samaa kieltä.*

*Niin, me kaikki tarvitsemme määritelmiä, tietoa, ymmärrystä.*

*Sirkuskriitikolle keskusteluyhteys ja Euroopan laajuinen verkostoituminen ovat yksi ratkaisu, kuten saimme kokea Pariisissa kesäkuussa 2009 järjestetyssä kriitikoiden residenssissä. Tieto eri maiden kehityksestä ja esimerkit erilaisista esitystyypeistä kulkevat kätevimmin konkreettisissa työpajoissa ja seminaareissa. Aivan ratkaisevaa on myös kirjoitetun tiedon levittäminen, sirkustutkimus, jota levitetään riittävän monella kielellä. Välillisesti tärkeää on myös tukea aloitteita, jotka mahdollistavat taiteellisten töiden mahdollisimman vapaan liikkumisen Euroopassa: kriitikon näkemys erityyppisistä esityksistä kasvaa vain näkemisen ja kokemisen kautta.*

*Suomessa Sirkuksen tiedotuskeskus aloitti keväällä 2009 sarjan aloitteleville sirkuskriitikoille suunnattujen työpajojen sarjan. Opettajina ja luennoitsijoina on ollut varttuneempia kriitikoita sekä nykysirkusryhmien taiteilijoita. Työpajoihin on kuulunut esityskäyntejä, joiden analyysija on yhdessä eritelty. Keväällä järjestettiin myös luentosarja yhteistyössä Helsingin yliopiston taiteen tutkimuksen laitoksen teatteritieteen kanssa. Työpajat on koettu tärkeiksi, ja niitä jatketaan edelleen. Yliopisto puolestaan aloittaa syksyllä 2009 sirkustutkimuksen kurssit. Tiedon ja ymmärryksen määrä tulee siis lisääntymään.*

*Toinen tiedotuskeskuksen tapa sitouttaa suomalaisia ammattikriitikoita sirkukseen on sirkuksen vuosittainen tunnustuspalkinto, joka jaetaan ensimmäisen kerran helmikuussa 2010. Tiedotuskeskus kutsui palkinnon raatiin maan viisi keskeistä sirkuskriitikkoa, jotka kulkevat vuoden ajan katsomassa tärkeimmät esitykset tutustuen sitä kautta alan todellisuuteen.*

## Elämää kritiikin jälkeen?

*Vanha totuus on, että yksityinen on yleistä. Ja näin taitaa olla asianlaita myös sirkuskritiikin osalta. Suomen kaltaisessa pienessä maassa nykysirkuksen kaltainen pieni taiteenala tarvitsee kaikki mahdolliset tukijansa. Olemme siksi lähteneet ajattelusta, joka pyrkii yhdistämään voimia. Yritämme edetä tiedon ja siitä syntyvän innostuksen kautta. Kriitikon rooli tiedonvälittäjänä on tärkeä. Ehkä "pienen" nykysirkusmaan sirkuskriitikon seuraava askel voisi olla koota omalla kielellään yhteen tietämyksen maansa sirkuksen tilanteesta, toimia nuoren taiteenalan puolestapuhujana, astua rinnalla kulkijasta aktiiviseen rooliin.*

# Is Performing Arts Criticism a Collateral Victim of Social Changes?

## *Je li kritika izvedbenih umjetnosti kolateralna žrtva društvenih promjena?*

Article by **Ivana Slunjski**

The position of theatre and performing arts critique as both an independent literary genre and academic branch has changed drastically during recent years in Croatia. The majority of reasons for that can be found in the domination of the telematic age and insufficient telematic adjustment of the existing media whereby information and communication networks such as the Internet suppress the role of printed media. Another reason is the cumulative character of the capitalist economy, which follows the logic of maximum profit in return for minimum investment. In the struggle for market domination, daily press often succumb to yellow journalism, purchasing and reselling agency information as well as collecting only partially verified information from electronic networks – all of which is quicker and more profitable than producing one's own information – and then reshape such information, often adding the touch of sensationalism in the process. Enabling communication in all directions and quick recipient reaction in particular, electronic journalism shows great potential in and of itself, provided it does not get caught in the profit-making trap, as often is the case. Discussing whether the new technology will devour the old is entirely redundant here, but the impacts and consequences of the electronic restructuring of everyday life cannot be denied.

### The Vicious Circle

In the information placement race, the quality of writing inevitably fades, while some journalism forms lose their significance and even die out. For instance, among the top five daily newspapers in Croatia, including two of distinctly regional character, two of them no longer publish theatre reviews, one of which has completely degraded the culture section merging it with the lifestyle section. The same paper had an article with a critical note about the latest ballet premiere reduced to a mere three short sentences in the manner of haiku poetry. Even though performing arts critique at the first glance does not seem an appropriate ground for manipulation, it is subject to open and sophisticated forms of censorship, various favours to theatre managers appointed more for their political aptness than for the quality of the programmes they propose, propaganda, as well as due to direct political pressure. In such circumstances, it is hard to believe that critique can be uncompromising or at least competent. The above stated changes are to some extent also visible in other European countries. As for essayistic critique and stronger theoretical discourse, the situation in culture magazines and specialised periodicals is much more favourable. However, the future of periodicals is uncertain because their reading audience is too small to be competitive in the market and their survival usually depends on the not-too-generous support from the Ministry of Culture and municipal grants. Such a state aggravates their publishing regularity and payments of author fees. Since the average reader is already bombarded with short news and unchallenging journalistic forms through daily newspapers and as such is predestined to certain text amounts and elaboration methods, the number of potential recipients of more complex reading materials is in decline. Let us not forget the reduced

*Pozicija kazališne kritike, odnosno kritike izvedbenih umjetnosti kao samosvojnje književne vrste, ali i kao znanstvene discipline posljednjih godina u Hrvatskoj drastično se mijenja. Velik dio uzroka tomu možemo tražiti u dominaciji telematske ere i nedostatnoj telematičkoj prilagodbi postojećih medija, pri čemu informacijsko-komunikacijske mreže kao što je Internet potiskuju ulogu tiskanih medija. Drugi je razlog kumulacijski karakter kapitalističke ekonomije koja se vodi logikom da uz što je moguće manje ulaganja postigne maksimalnu dobit. U borbi za prevlast na tržištu dnevni tisak sve više podliježe žutilu, kupovini i preprodaji agencijskih informacija, ali i prikupljanju tek djelomično provjerenih informacija s elektroničkih mreža, što je sve brže i isplativije nego proizvodnja vlastitih, te njihovu prekrajanju, koje tada često zadobiva senzacionalistički predznak. Omogućujući komunikaciju u svim smjerovima, napose brzu reakciju recipijentata, elektroničko novinarstvo samo po sebi krije veliki potencijal, pod uvjetom da i samo ne dopadne žrvnja isključivog zgrtanja profita, kao što je to često slučaj. Rasprava hoće li nova tehnologija progutati staru ovdje je posve suvišna, no utjecaji i posljedice elektroničkog preustroja svakodnevce ne mogu se poreći.*

### *U začaranom krugu*

*U utrci tko će brže plasirati što više informacija neizbježno opada kvaliteta napisanog, dok pojedine novinarske forme gube na značaju, pa čak i nestaju. Primjerice, od pet vodećih dnevnih listova u Hrvatskoj, uključujući i dva lista naglašeno regionalna karaktera, dva su lista u potpunosti ukinula kazališnu kritiku, pritom je jedan posve minorizirao rubriku kulture utopivši je u rubrici lifestyle. U istim se novinama napis s kritičkom notom o posljednjoj ovosezonskoj baletnoj premijeri sveo na doslovno tri kratke rečenice u maniri haiku poezije. Premda se kritika izvedbenih umjetnosti na prvi pogled ne čini prikladnim prostorom manipulacije, i ona je podložna i otvorenim i rafiniranim oblicima cenzure, raznim ustupcima ravnateljima kazališta postavljenih više političkom direktivom negoli kvalitetom predloženog programa, propagandi kao i izravnim političkim pritiscima. U tim okolnostima teško je povjerovati da kritika može biti beskompromisna ili barem meritorna. Dio navedenih promjena jamačno je osjetan i u ostalim europskim zemljama. Što se prostora za esejističku kritiku i snažnijeg teorijskog diskursa izvedbenih umjetnosti tiče, situacija u kulturnim časopisima i specijaliziranim periodičnim izdanjima znatno je povoljnija. No, budućnost periodičnih izdanja također je neizvjesna jer čitateljska populacija koju privlače nije dostatna za tržišnu konkurentnost te njihov opstanak gotovo u pravilu ovisi o ne baš izdašnoj potpori Ministarstva kulture i proračunima na gradskim razinama. Takvo stanje otežava redovito izlaženje publikacija i isplatu honorara suradnicima. Budući da je svijest prosječnog čitatelja već u dnevnom tisku izložena bombardiranju kratkim vijestima i nezahtjevnijim novinskim formama i time predestinirana na određenu količinu teksta i*



purchase power of the educated population, which constitutes the broadly termed 'middle class'.

## The Marginalization of Non-verbal Artistic Forms

There is a conservative opinion deeply-rooted among the Croatian cultural public that performing arts should be hierarchically ranked. One criterion is to make a divide between institutional theatres – the term 'institution' meaning only the model which reflects the space-programme relation – and independent, programmatically realised theatres and companies. Another criterion is to classify between the performing genres and types. In this schematic, priority is given to adult dramatic theatre, where non-verbal performing disciplines, physical theatre, modern dance, performance, circus and various cross genres and experimental projects are at the same time marginalized. Accordingly, critical evaluation, whether daily or academic, does not pay the same amount of attention to each of the artistic disciplines. Contemporary dance critique, even though the development of dance as an acknowledged art form in Croatia can be – in spite of all difficulties, from insufficient financial support and dancers and choreographers' status valuation to the non-existent dance education system – traced back to the 1960s, has struggled for adequate media attention until today. Dance critique texts in daily papers rarely go over 1800 characters, and are often, being considered of lesser importance, written by assignment of beginner journalists who value performances using superficial and flimsy remarks such as "breezy", "playful", "charming" or "graceful". Since dance in Croatian context has been a predominantly female discipline from its very beginnings, I am inclined to think that it is stereotypically devaluated as a permitted, but not overly appreciated sphere of social and artistic activity. The case is similar with other non-verbal performing arts. This stigmatization as a less valuable art form also comes from the lack of understanding of non-verbal expression. Numerous cultural inscriptions, accentuated intertextuality and intermediality of those arts demand continuous education from both critics and audience, something which lacks in the general education system, and frequently during the subsequent journalist

*format izlaganja, broj potencijalnih recipijenata kompleksnije izložene građe u silaznoj je putanji. Ne zaboravimo ni smanjenu kupovnu moć intelektualnog sloja stanovništva, koja tvori široko definiranu "srednju klasu".*

## Marginalizacija neverbalnog izraza

*U hrvatskoj kulturnoj javnosti uvriježilo se konzervativno mišljenje da je izvedbene umjetnosti nužno hijerarhijski rangirati. Jedan je kriterij podjela na institucionalna kazališta, razumijevajući pod institucijom model koji reflektira isključivo relaciju prostor – program, i neovisna, programski realizirana kazališta i skupine. Drugi je kriterij hijerarhizacije podjela na izvedbene vrste i tipove. U toj shemi primat ima dramsko kazalište za odrasle, a neverbalne izvedbene discipline, fizički teatar, suvremeni ples, performans, cirkus i razne hibridne forme i eksperimentalni projekti istodobno se marginaliziraju. Sukladno tomu ni kritička evaluacija, bilo da je riječ o dnevnoj kritici ili onoj akademskoj, ne posvećuje jednaku pozornost svakoj od umjetničkih disciplina. Kritika suvremenoga plesa, iako se razvoj plesa kao ravnopravne umjetničke discipline u Hrvatskoj uz sve poteškoće, od nedostatne financijske potpore i vrednovanja statusa plesača i koreografa do nepostojanja sustavnoga plesnog obrazovanja, može pratiti od 1960-ih, do danas se bori za adekvatan medijski prostor. U dnevnom tisku plesna kritika rijetko prelazi karticu teksta, a nije neuobičajeno da je po dužnosti kao manje važnu pišu novinari početnici, vrednujući predstavu površnim i neobvezujućim opaskama kao što su "lepršavo", "vrcavo", "šarmantno" ili "dražesno". Budući da je ples u hrvatskom kontekstu od samih početaka dominantno ženska disciplina, sklona sam mišljenju da je stereotipno obezvrjeđivan kao dopuštena, ali ne pretjerano cijenjena sfera društvene i umjetničke aktivnosti. Slično prolaze i druge primarno neverbalne izvedbene discipline. Do njihova apostrofiranja kao manje vrijednih umjetničkih oblika dolazi i zbog nerazumijevanja neverbalnog iskaza. Brojne kulturalne inskripcije, naglašena intertekstualnost i intermedijalnost tih disciplina zahtijeva kontinuiranu edukaciju i kritičara i publike, što u općeobrazovnom sustavu izostaje, a počesto i u*



and critic self-education which is necessary due to the ongoing process of redefining the performing arts limits to comply with social changes. Under such circumstances, non-verbal performing arts critique survives only thanks to the perseverance of devoted individuals.

### Putting the Circus Arts in Given Context

The poetics of contemporary circus was almost unknown in Croatia before 2000. The situation significantly changed in 2005 after Mr Ivan Kralj founded the Novog Cirkusa festival. Thanks to his far-reaching vision and initiative, thematically devised festival profile, invitations to European circus troupes, encouragement to home artists to create and organising circus workshops, contemporary circus is slowly growing and becoming a relevant artistic discipline. Contemporary circus critique has been treated similarly as dance or other non-verbal art critique, bearing in mind that the term "circus arts" is still associated with the images of traditional circus as entertainment attraction. Because of that, contemporary circus, though far from being a mere demonstration of circus skills, is perceived by the wider public as an attractive performance form. In that sense, contemporary circus is given a fair share of space in daily printed and electronic media for announcements, press conference reports, discussions, thematic texts. Although circus critique is still peripheral in most daily media, in some papers one can find an expertly elaborated review. In the best case, contemporary circus show reviews are written by a handful of established critics scattered over culture magazines who, out of professional or personal interest, incline towards non-verbal art, hybrid forms and aesthetic pluralism. Since the first contemporary circus reviews which displayed a somewhat clumsy use of analytic codes and lack of knowledge about banal differences between similar terms, the progress has been evident. The approach to circus performance interpretation, as with other arts, is based on Western metaphysics and all the meanings which a phenomenon in the Western culture emanates. Trouble in deciphering circus performances comes when the meaning of a certain position or gesture depends on the historical development of circus techniques. In contemporary dance for example, the body in vertical position on stage in a defined context of the play may imply different meanings, but always a certain number of different meanings among which then the critic balances. When viewing a circus show, many meanings are overlooked or misinterpreted due to critics' not being sufficiently introduced to the differences among various circus art directions or individual techniques. The development of terminology would certainly be helpful here. Contemporary circus in academic discourse is still non-existent.

Performing arts critique in Croatia generally has no significant influence on the shaping of public opinion. Shows remain in the repertory no matter how badly the critics review them. Popularity primarily depends on spreading the information about the show by word of mouth, and the critique has but a small impact. Currently, contemporary circus shows take place during festival intervals and are not selected in the regular repertory of any institutional theatre. When circus arts reach that level, I assume that status of circus critique will not be very different from that in other performing arts. However, one should not neglect the fact that critique abundantly contributes to the distinctiveness of individual performance art features and them being positioned as artistic disciplines.

*kasnijoj samoedukaciji novinara i kritičara, koja je nužna zbog stalnog procesa redefiniranja granica izvedbenih umjetnosti u skladu s društvenim mijenama. U takvim uvjetima kritika neverbalnih izvedbenih formi opstaje zahvaljujući isključivo ustrajnosti osviještenih pojedinaca.*

*Smještanje cirkuske umjetnosti u dani kontekst Poetika suvremenog cirkusa do 2000. u Hrvatskoj je bila gotovo nepoznanica. Situacija se bitno mijenja 2005. nakon što je Ivan Kralj osnovao Festival novog cirkusa. Zahvaljujući dalekosežnosti vizije i inicijative Ivana Kralja, tematski promišljenim profiliranjem Festivala, pozivanjem europskih cirkuskih skupina, poticanjem domaćih umjetnika na stvaranje i organiziranjem radionica cirkuskih vještina, suvremeni cirkus polako raste u relevantnu umjetničku disciplinu. Kritika suvremenog cirkusa ima sličan tretman kao i plesna kritika ili kritika drugih neverbalnih izvedbenih formi, s tim da se uz termin cirkuske umjetnosti još nejasno vežu konotacije tradicionalnog cirkusa kao zabavljачke atrakcije. Stoga se i suvremeni cirkus, iako je daleko od puke demonstracije cirkuskih vještina, u široj javnosti doživljava kao atraktivna izvedbena forma. Tako shvaćen suvremeni cirkus u dnevnim tiskanim i elektroničkim medijima dobiva znatan prostor za najave, izvještaje s novinskih konferencija, razgovore, tematske tekstove. Iako je u većini dnevnih medija cirkuska kritika i dalje rubna pojava, u pojedinim se novinama može naići i na znalački elaboriranu kritiku. U boljem slučaju kritiku predstava suvremenoga cirkusa piše nekolicina etabliranih kritičara razasuta po kulturnim časopisima, koja se iz profesionalnih ili osobnih interesa priklanja neverbalnom izrazu, hibridnim formama i estetskom pluralizmu. Od prvih kritika suvremenoga cirkusa u kojima se vidi nevještost u baratanju analitičkim kodovima i nepoznavanje banalnih razlika između sličnih termina, pomak je osjetan. Tumačenju cirkuskih predstava pristupa se, kao i u slučaju drugih umjetnosti, sa zaledem zapadne metafizike i svim značenjima koje određena pojava u zapadnjačkoj kulturi emanira. Poteškoće u dešifriranju cirkuske izvedbe nastaju kad značenje određene pozicije ili pokreta ovisi o povijesnom razvoju cirkuskih tehnika. U suvremenom plesu tijelo na sceni, primjerice, u vertikalnom položaju u definiranom kontekstu predstave može konotirati različita značenja, ali uvijek određeni broj različitih značenja među kojima tada kritičar balansira. Kad se promatra cirkuska predstava, mnoga se značenja previđaju ili krivo interpretiraju jer su kritičari nedovoljno upućeni u razlike među pravcima cirkuske umjetnosti ili razlike među pojedinim tehnikama. I razvoj terminologije u tome bi svakako pomogao. Suvremenoga cirkusa u znanstvenom diskursu još nema. Kritika izvedbenih umjetnosti općenito u Hrvatskoj nema većeg utjecaja na oblikovanje javnog mijenja. Predstave ostaju na repertoaru ma kako ih kritika loše ocijenila. Gledanost prije svega ovisi o širenju glasa o predstavi usmenim putem, kritika tu utječe vrlo malo. Predstave suvremenog cirkusa zasad se događaju u festivalskim intervalima i nisu uvrštene u redovni repertoar ni jednog institucionalnog kazališta. Kad se cirkuska umjetnost razvije do tog stupnja, pretpostavljam da se ni cirkuska kritika statusno neće razlikovati od kritike drugih izvedbenih umjetnosti. Ipak, ne smije se zanemariti činjenica da kritika uvelike prinosi prepoznatljivosti osobitosti pojedinih izvedbenih formi i njihovu pozicioniranju kao umjetničkih disciplina.*

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## Stradda · special issue in English

Stradda is the French magazine on the circus and outdoor creation. A special issue, entirely in english will be published in November 2009. It will consist of thematic dossiers focusing on the street arts and circus in Europe. This issue will include articles on the street and circus arts that have appeared in Stradda's previous publications (nos. 1 to 14) .

7,50 € · Please contact: [diffusion@horslesmurs.fr](mailto:diffusion@horslesmurs.fr)

## Stradda · dossiers available to download

A new series of articles is available to download every two months. They are extracts from Stradda translated into English.

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'Dance in art', August 2008 · 9 € · Place order at: [diffusion@horslesmurs.fr](mailto:diffusion@horslesmurs.fr)

HorsLesMurs · French national resource centre for street arts and circus.

Circostrada Network · European platform for information, research and professional exchanges.

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