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The Art of the Circus; An exploration of the circus within its social, historical, and cultural contexts

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THE ART OF THE CIRCUS

Introduction

The Collins English dictionary gives a definition of circus as 'a travelling company of entertainers, such as acrobats, clowns, trapeze artists, and trained animals'; 'a public performance given by such a company'; 'an arena, usually tented, in which such a performance is held'. Yet these are just physical descriptions of a far more complex subject. The circus is difficult to define because it seems to embody so many paradoxes. It can be magical and entertaining but it can also be subversive and political. It is ephemeral yet deeply embedded within our popular culture. Its perceived 'otherness', in terms of its unfamiliar social structure and life-style, creates an existence beyond the norm. Yet the circus reflects our daily lives and struggles in the way that it confronts risk and danger. It is both old and new at the same time; old skills being reworked and presented within a contemporary world. The circus is an eclectic art form that exists in conjunction with other art forms.

This paper supports and academically complements the body of published work by the author on aspects of the circus, and explicates a theory implicit within that work. The published work is intended to provide scholarly but accessible information primarily for a non-academic audience. It explores how the circus, as a distinct art form, has developed from primitive roots to current practices, and attempts to place it within its social, historical, and cultural contexts. This paper will focus on the justifications for circus to be accepted as a legitimate art form. It will examine how circus developed initially with exhibitions of equitation; how it constantly adapted and re-invented itself to meet the needs of a changing society; and how it has evolved into the multi-faceted art form of today. Several important issues will be covered but the limitations of this paper will preclude any detailed discussion, and will be addressed fully in subsequent papers.

Methodology

Working as an acrobatic clown for a short time; as an educationalist bringing circus and education together; as a youth circus director and lobbyist; and latterly as a circus

historian and researcher has provided forty years of experience that underpins my current work. The research undertaken for the published works has spanned six years. By considering the circus to be a distinct cultural system, it has been based upon ethnographic investigation approaches, particularly in relation to the consideration and observation of socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings as outlined in Whitehead (2005:5-6). Primary data was examined and analysed in archives, both in the UK and in France, such as posters and advertising, letters, newspapers, journals, and diaries; objective research giving an etic perspective. Further primary data, giving an emic perspective to the research, was gathered from direct observations, which appear as anecdotal evidence, ethnographic vignettes, and unstructured conversational interviews. Enkin M.W. and Jadad A.R. (1998:963-964) highlight the importance of such anecdotal information. Secondary data was gathered from existing publications, biographies, and records, both in physical and digital format.

1: Modernity and tradition

The term 'modern', within the circus community, is widely used for the style of entertainment created by Philip Astley, commonly accepted as the founder of the 'modern circus' in the latter half of the eighteenth century. It is a convenient descriptor used to distinguish Astley's performances from earlier popular entertainments. But what was there before the 'modern'? Astley was not the first to give exhibitions of horsemanship; William Cavendish was doing so in his Riding House at Bolsover Castle during the previous century. Before Astley gave his equestrian demonstrations, gradually interspersed with other acts such as rope-dancers, strong men, and clowns, there were disparate groups and individuals presenting generic physical skills that could be interpreted as belonging to the circus (Ward, 2014). Although these performers were popular entertainments at fairs and pleasure gardens there was no structure or body of organisation that facilitated their corporate performances as a distinct genre until the time of Astley.

However, as this 'modern circus' developed it assimilated many of the innovations, ideas, and socio-economic processes of a growing nineteenth century industrial society. New technologies were incorporated into increasingly more complex stage machinery. The

expansion of the railway system allowed a greater mobility for both circuses and audiences. The reduction of the working week, albeit slight, and the growth in the leisure industry created more opportunities for circus to expand. The nineteenth century was also a time of imperial expansion, both commercial and military. The exploits of the 'military hero' were included in circus programmes with lavish productions such as *The Battle of Waterloo* and *The Siege of Valenciennes*. As Arrighi (2012:1) states; 'nineteenth century circuses … embodied ideas about what it was to be modern, functioning as a metonym for modernity'. The term modern also creates a contradiction in itself. 250 years later we still refer to the circus as the 'modern' circus and yet at the same time label it as 'traditional'. The Oxford Dictionary gives a definition of modern as 'relating to the present or recent times'. Modern means of the present; the current now. If Modernity is the condition of being modern, then it is in a process of continual change because the present unfailingly becomes the past (Anttonen, 2005). A tradition can be defined as being created out of a repeated series of actions or rituals across an extended period of time. Hobsbawm (1983:1-4) concludes that invented traditions, within the modern era, are a process of ritualisation and formalisation that produce values and norms through repetition that establish a perceived continuity with the past. If we accept this premise, then this repetition of set structures within the circus has resulted in an institutional form of circus that we now term as 'traditional'. Carmeli (1991:275-289) expands further on this by proposing that, '… the ritual produced by this formulaic circus becomes like visiting the past …' But even this creates problems when trying to categorise circus. As Mock (1994:102) states, 'the circus is forced to repeatedly invent new elements of astonishment in order to amuse subsequent generations of audience…'

If, as Mock claims, the circus is repeatedly re-inventing itself then it could be argued that traditions within the circus are also being re-invented. Does this mean that we have to consider a particular tradition contextualised within its historical-cultural viewpoint, with a subscription to a particular set of values? If so, then the word traditional when applied to circus, as a genre, has little meaning; in the same way that modern also has little meaning. Kavanagh (2017:1) attempts to overcome this problem by labelling the 'traditional' circus as 'classic' circus. But the circus can always be considered modern if placed within its concurrent socio-historic context. Perhaps a more aptly generic term for the circus would be 'timeless' (Bouissac, 2007:2), a point discussed in Section 7.

I believe there is also a tendency to equate traditional with the nostalgic. Bouissac (2007:9) makes the point that,

> '… older generations can be nostalgic about the traditional circuses they have known, with its pungent smell of sawdust and wild animals, the social marginality of its performers, their dangerous seduction and their perceived proximity to death, and the ritualistic quality of their ephemeral performances'.

When Giffords Circus began in 2000, their aim was to '… start a circus that would be evocative of a village-green circus from your remembered childhood, or from a story book, or a dream …' (Gifford, 2014:23)

Gifford deliberately wanted to create a family circus of the imagination, where strange characters and events from childhood memories fleetingly appear. This has been the success of Giffords, in that it draws upon those nostalgic remembrances within us and mixes it with notions of tradition. A review of their current show *My Beautiful Circus*, thematically set in the 1930s, calls it 'stylised vintage circus' (The Stage, 2018). But I contend that circus is fluid and constantly changing. It has to in order to survive, otherwise it would become little more than a museum piece. As Mock has indicated above, each new generation seeks a new stimulus within the circus. But familiarity with the traditional also provides a comfortable environment for the audience (Ward, 2014:201), and hence the continuing popularity of circuses such as Giffords.

2: Circus: Towards a new terminology

The circus constantly draws upon the past to re-invent itself as something new and therefore we need to find a more appropriate terminology that embraces circus as a whole. I consider the term *Pre-Astleian* more appropriate to cover all presentations of generic physical 'circus' skills before the foundation date of 1768. The *Astleian* period, covering the period 1768 to approximately 1860, extends beyond the death of Astley in 1814 to the time when Charles Blondin introduced the high wire act (Loxton, 1997), and Jules Leotard the flying trapeze (Demoriane, 1989), both in 1859. The inclusion of these new and daring aerial performances into the circus completed the canon of circus acts that we are now so familiar with. The *Post-*

Astleian period covers from 1860 to 1970. The period after 1860 through to the twentieth century saw the development of a particular circus aesthetic, with its distinctive costuming, music, and style of presentation that has been more commonly labelled as 'Traditional'. Circus shows developed into a succession of unrelated physical acts, sometimes with animals. Gone were the burlettas and dramatic stage presentations of the Astleian period, although large scale equestrian dramas and epic spectaculars still remained popular. Much has been written about this Post-Astleian period[1], particularly during the twentieth century. However, these books were largely accounts of individual acts and circuses, and the general life of the circus. There was little attempt to explore any meaning embodied within the circus, or any research into the potential for circus within a social or educational context. It was not until the global social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s that ushered in a new era for the circus, discussed later in this paper, that we begin to witness circus as a subject for research.

3: Circus: Art of Craft?

The question as to whether circus should be considered an art form has been widely debated. Anthony Hippisley-Coxe (1951) was one of the first to raise the issue when he determined that circus was a craft rather than an art. His justification for this lies in his belief that circus is a demonstrative activity, with no interpretive dimension to it (Stoddard, 2000:80). Art is a spectacle of illusion, whereas circus is a spectacle of actuality (Coxe, 1951:17-18). For example, in the theatre we are asked to suspend our disbelief. We know that characters portrayed are not real; it is an illusion into which we enter. Theatre is representational, in that what appears upon the stage is generally considered a representation of reality – not reality itself (Kaufman, 2004). It allows the audience, as passive observers, an interpretative space to reflect upon, or be moved by, the action or text. Implicit within the concept of 'art' is this provision for cerebral analysis of the work itself (Stoddart, 2000:79-81). By contrast, Handleman, (1991:213) proposes that the circus is non-illusory; the performers present skills that are real and happen at that time. They do not *pretend* to perform the skills; they actually *do* them. What the audience sees is what the audience gets; there is no artifice and no attempt at deception. Unlike most forms of theatre, that ask us to accept that events portrayed in the past are actually happening in current time, circus acts exist in real time (Tetrault, 2007:216). In this respect it could be argued that Coxe's definition is credible but

only if, within a circus act, the focus remains purely on the physical skill. Many core physical skills observed within the circus also feature within sporting gymnastic competitions. Take for example the gymnastic floor exercises, or the Roman Rings; both seen at the Olympic Games. Actions created here are also seen within the tumbling and aerial routines in the circus. But within the world of gymnastics each athlete is focused upon being the best; trying to achieve perfection within their field; to out-perform all other competitors. The demonstration of the skill becomes the *raison d'être* of the competitor. He is not performing for an audience, in the way that an actor or circus performer may do. There is no requirement to entertain, although his performance may be entertaining to the spectators. It is not a conscious act upon his part; he is performing for himself, measuring his skill against what he has already achieved in order to advance towards perfection (Tetrault, 2007 ibid.). It could be argued that the panel of judges is the audience, but here too this 'audience' is focused entirely upon a measured assessment of the skill demonstrated.

Drawing out this distinction between theatrical and physical skills, Coxe was able to quantify the circus as physical, and therefore not 'art'. His definition of circus as a craft echoes the work of Raymond Williams. Williams draws a distinction between art and work based on the premise that the growth of nineteenth century industrialisation created a commodity driven society in which the artist (and the arts) were conceptually abstracted. Art as an activity, particularly performance art, had no exchange value in an exchange based economy, and this led Williams (1976), cited in Stoddart (2000:81), to also separate the artist from the artisan, craftsman, and skilled worker. Williams does not however distinguish between the process of art and the product or artwork created. I suggest that created art forms; painting, sculpture, theatre, dance, circus, all have an economic value. They can be bought, sold, or paid for to be viewed. But does that necessarily distort the artistic value of the finished art product? Is the artist corrupted by producing art for a market? Some would say so (Merryman, 2004:26), and this is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper. Prior to the nineteenth century, much art work was commissioned. Royalty, wealthy individuals, and the church all commissioned works of art. Plays and music were also commissioned in the same manner. In these cases the artist (here in generic usage) produced his art for a specific purpose; he was not engaged in the process of creating art purely as an aesthetic activity. Only since the mid nineteenth century has Art (with a capital 'a') been associated with the acceptance of the artist as having a

legitimate professional role in society, producing art for art's sake. Interestingly, art (deliberately here with a lower case 'a') was a term in early usage, particularly in the medieval era when crafts were organised into Guilds and Companies, that covered skilled workmanship and expertise; the carpenter's craft was an art; the mason's work was an art (Cramb, 1992). This sits well with Williams's theory but the debate about the aesthetic qualities of Fine Art is complex and is complicated further by the trends in popular culture [of the time] (Bennett et.al.,2005:6-7). For Coxe, the argument was more simplistic; if circus was not an art then it had to be bracketed within the world of the craftsman. He did not draw the distinction between art as popular culture and Fine Art, and as such his argument is flawed. For me, circus is an expressive bodily art form more closely aligned with other performance arts such as the theatre and dance, in contrast to the more static and product orientated Fine Art. But if, as Coxe maintains, circus does fall within the area of a craft (and therefore by extension work) can it be commodified in the same way as Fine Art?

Certainly, it could be argued that the circus, as a whole, is a commercial enterprise offering highly skilled performances in return for financial profits, albeit for circus proprietors rather than individual performers. When Astley first gave his equestrian performances it was more out of a need to earn a living. As his (and his contemporaries') popularity grew, the artistic content of the shows had to be balanced against economic demands. The same could be argued for the Cirque du Soleil. A trawl of their website[2] shows twenty currently listed performances world-wide. Resident shows take place within hotels/casinos and theme parks, and in terms of marketing have been likened to Broadway theatre shows or Rock and Roll concerts (Morimura et. al., 2011:7). Like the large circus outfits such as Barnum & Bailey, the Cirque du Soleil now plays to audiences of many thousands. On their current UK tour they will appear at the Manchester Arena (capacity 21,000) and the First Direct Arena in Leeds (capacity 14,000). The content of many of their shows is moving towards large scale arena spectaculars. The audience, now spectators, can be overwhelmed by a multitude of sensory stimuli. Has the intimacy of the ring, 'one of the most universal characteristics of the circus' (Jacob, 2018:53), been lost at the expense of economic profit?

Many people comment that the cost of attending a Cirque du Soleil performance is now prohibitive, especially for a family. Individual tickets for their current show *Totem* at the Royal Albert Hall in London range from £27.95/£38.70 (child/adult standing) to £110.73/£121.48

(child/adult Premium Stalls). 'The typical audience of this type of show is usually people with relatively high income that is willing to pay enough to see a high quality show' (Morimura et. al., 2011:12). Norman Barrett echoed this in an interview with the author that the Cirque does not have a normal circus going public, and that while their work has to be acknowledged, people are returning to the smaller more 'traditional' circuses because they prefer the intimacy of the ring (Ward, 2014:201). The ring allows one to focus on the acts being performed. It is a communally shared experience and the ring is a natural gathering space. It provides a sense of security from where the audience can witness moments of 'danger' (cf Section 6 below).

4: Circus: Art or Skill?

The Cirque du Soleil is also a strong case for the argument that highly skilled physical athletes can present artistic performances. The Cirque employs many trained athletes and gymnasts who make the switch from competitive sport to circus performance. So what makes a gymnastic demonstration a bodily art? Peta Tait, writing specifically about aerial performances, maintains that an aerial performance is a physical art created with the body. She further writes (2005:2) 'Circus skills are physical actions … an aerial act is composed of a sequence of prescribed moves … which are linked together with freer choreography, in an interpretative artistic routine to music …'

This statement offers a rationale as to why circus can be defined as an art form. To be such, it has to be more than just the pure physical skill, important though this may be. There has to be some element within the performance that surpasses the skill. This is clearly shown in a comparison of the vertical pole routine in the Cirque du Soleil's show *Saltimbanco*, with a similar routine given at a Chinese circus school[3]. In *Saltimbanco* the performers are costumed in brightly coloured body-suits, their movements are choreographed to accompanying music, and the space is appropriately lit. The number is enhanced by other performers at ground level who, by acting as an audience within the performance, draw the circus-goers attention to the action and potential danger of the routine (Bouissac, 2016). In contrast, in the circus school version the performers are all boys, identically dressed in uniforms of white shirts, shorts, knee socks, and pumps. They demonstrated a high level of physical skill in operating

on the poles. Their sequence of movements was drilled rather than choreographed; in the same way that a troop of soldiers marching on a parade ground might be. Here we see a demonstration of physical skills presented *at* an audience, rather than *for* an audience; there is little if any attempt to engender any empathy from the audience. In the *Saltimbanco* number the function goes beyond the demonstration of the skill, evident in itself, and becomes a synthesis of elements that communicate with the audience; costume, colours, lighting, music, performance (Bouissac, 1976:41)

The art of juggling is another example that explicates the distinction between art and skill or craft. An audience member once said to me that there is nothing more boring than watching a juggler. For the average person, having got over the wow factor of someone manipulating objects in time and space, it is of little consequence to them whether the performer is juggling with three or more objects. It takes another juggler to appreciate the complexity and level of skill in creating the finished performance. The same comment could apply to many other circus skills. I contend that it is what the performer does with that skill; how they package and present it, that changes the raw skill into an artistic performance. Consider the following ethnographic vignette, drawn from my Youth Circus experience.

We were preparing for a show. The programme included many different circus skills. One thirteen year old boy, let's call him John, was already an accomplished juggler; able to juggle five balls or clubs. He offered to present these juggling skills. A younger girl, Jane, still at novice skill level, asked if she could perform a juggling act. Already here was a difference; John had asked to present a skill; Jane asked to perform an act. Following our inclusion policy, all children were encouraged to take part in the show irrespective of ability level. John stepped into the ring. He had not asked for any music or particular lighting. Dressed in his normal clothes, he began juggling with three balls. After a while he paused, picked up a fourth ball and continued juggling. He paused again, picked up the fifth ball and continued. At the end he stopped, nodded to the audience, and left the performance space to polite applause. Later came Jane. She had requested a spotlight in the centre of the space. From the darkness stage left, one juggling ball appeared and landed in the pool of light; the audience giggled. A second ball appeared from stage right; the audience began to laugh. The third ball appeared from the back stage darkness and landed to join the others; the audience were now fully laughing. She then appeared, dressed as a ballerina, and cartwheeled into the light. Scooping up the

balls, she completed one full cascade pattern before making an expansive bow to the audience and ran off. The audience clapped enthusiastically.

These two numbers were very different, although they embraced the same basic skill. John, for all his ability, gave a demonstration of his skill. He had not done anything with it to engage the audience. Jane, by comparison, with limited skill ability, had clearly thought about what she wanted to do and how she could engage her audience. She had also thought about how she would present her act, how she would costume it, how it should be lit, and how it would be structured. She had an overall narrative concept for her act that she had then creatively engaged with to develop a finished routine that would engage and entertain the audience. Her performance had become, in Sugarman's terms 'a transcendence of juggling' (Sugarman, 2007:212). The engagement with the audience contextualised her performance. John's focus was purely upon his skill; it did not matter if he had an audience or not, his demonstration would have been the same. Jane's act was focused on the audience and their experience. Without an audience her act would not have been the same. Erving Goffman (1974:124-127) addresses this point in his discussion on the different levels of purity of performance. For him, the highest level is attached to performances such dramatic works, nightclub [circus] acts, and ballet. As he states (1974:125), 'no audience, no performance'. His lowest level of purity is given to work performances, including rehearsals, where the participants have scant regard for the performative content of their work, and therefore in my interpretation, a lack of concern for any potential audience. In this respect it could be argued that, unlike Jane, John's juggling demonstration falls within this 'work/craft' category. This further helps us delineate the distinction between the mere demonstration of a physical skill and an artistic performance of the skill. It is noticeable that throughout much of the discourse on whether circus is an art or not, the areas of concept, creativity, and context are missing. I believe that these are fundamental to understanding the nature of circus as an art form, as illustrated above.

5: The Audience dynamic

Implicit within performance art is the presence of an audience. The audience contextualises the performance within its defined space. An artistic performance becomes an interaction

with the audience, it is an activity of communication (Brown, 2011 in Pitches & Popat (eds), 2011:184). Kavanagh (2013:5) captures this notion succinctly,

> 'To me, circus speaks most clearly when a performed physical action invokes a physiological response, causing my heart to race, my breath stop, or my tears flow; if my emotional response comes from an intellectual place alone, it is not circus. But, if there is no room for my intellect to explore and touch new realms of possibility, then it isn't circus anymore either.'

The performers and, the often hidden, production team of lighting, sound, and costume, (who all enhance the aesthetic quality of the performance) give form and meaning to the performed activity, and the audience may interact in several ways; applause, gasps, tears, cheering, etc. In discussing her life as an aerialist, Rebecca Truman sometimes had to perform without an audience. She writes (Truman, 2018:5): 'It was very hard to perform properly with no audience; we would just go through the motions, no adrenaline, no feedback, weird and flat.'

Audience feedback is vital for the dynamics of a performance. It is not just the tangible audience response in terms of applause etc. but there is another level of response that is more difficult to quantify. In the theatre, the invisible fourth wall is a performance convention (Bell, 2008:203) that creates a distance between the active performers and the passive audience. In the circus, the physical structure of the ring, now conceptually a volume to be filled, allows the audience to surround the action. The circus has a three-dimensional quality (Radosavlević, 2012:20). The dynamic of the ring is, for me, fundamental to the audience experience. It is something that is rooted deep in human ancestry; it is a natural space for people to gather (Jacob, 2018:9.) The ring allows for a sense of communion. Not only can the audience see the performers, but they can also see each other. This becomes a communal experience that can transform the [theatrically] passive audience into one that is revitalised and re-activated through the energy of the performance (Rancière, 2009:3). It could be argued that the circus provides a re-enchantment in a 'disenchanted' modern world; a world where the qualities of mystery and richness have been lost to scientific rationalisation (Jenkins, 2000:5). At a Circus250[4] organised public Panel Discussion entitled *The Big Top across Five Continents – 250 years of Circus Worldwide* held in Sheffield on August 14 2018, Pascal Jacob, circus director and researcher of circus history, commented that for him the

circle [ring] was an artistically organic form that allowed a sharing of an experience for everyone at the same moment. It is a space within which actions become more easily understood (Jacob, 2018 ibid.). Coxe (1951:17) touches on this when he talks about the audience response being an intensified emotion that 'runs around the arena like an electric current'. It is a collective empathy that stretches between audience and performer; at the point where the audience become more than on-lookers and enter your world. But that world is both real and illusory at the same time. The circus embraces both elements. They are not diametrically opposed, and one does not necessarily exclude the other. They can be complementary. The audience knows that what they see, in terms of the physical actions presented, is real but when they enter the circus space they accept that they are entering a world of the other; different from the reality of everyday experience, something beyond the norm. Through its practices and traditions the circus has developed a culture of its own. It is a world of the exotic, disorder, inversion, and anomaly (Stoddard, 2000:89-90). The circus has consciously perpetuated this 'otherness' throughout its history. Examine circus advertising and you will often find adjectives such as exotic, beautiful, unrivalled, novel, antipodean, dangerous etc. This all adds to the idea of the otherness of the circus and as escapism from the ordinariness of everyday life for the audience.

6: Of risk and danger

Many circus acts are inherently dangerous and accidents are always possible. However, the *performance* of danger is often illusory as the audience does not always understand the actual risk involved (Tait, 2005 ibid.). The physical skills presented may be actual, there is no artifice, but the illusion of an enhanced danger is a part of a performer's artistic creativity (Carmeli,nd:3). When directing circus shows I have often suggested that each act will take the audience on a different journey. Individual acts will have their own structural narrative; a beginning, middle, and end. Often that journey may include a climax sometimes preceded by a false climax. Bouissac (2016) makes reference to the work of semiotician J. Greimass in explaining that a narrative structure is framed as a communication act in which a transformative process occurs. When the high-wire walker steps out onto the wire the audience collectively holds its breath. As she 'slips' they gasp, and when she safely reaches her goal at the other end there is a collective exhalation of relief. If the audience buys into

that narrative then the act has moved beyond the mere physical; it has engaged the audience on an emotional level through an artistic experience. The audience has momentarily lived in that illusory world of danger before being returned to reality, as the performer takes her bow at ground level and leaves the ring. They began that journey from a point of safety, their own reality, before entering the illusory world of the performer and, after the journey is completed they have been returned to that point of safety. And this is important for the audience. Through their involvement in the narrative they gain knowledge and understanding; they change from becoming passive to active spectators, and leave the circus as changed people. This is comparable with the theatre forms of Artaud and Brecht, for example, where an audience may be challenged or shocked in order to provoke a catharsis. The building of tension and its subsequent release generates a physiological response that Kavanagh has referred to above. It is interesting to note that people to whom I have talked, who profess to dislike the circus as a form, and not for any particular politically correct reasoning, see only the reality of the physical actions demonstrated. They seem to be unable to be receptive to the signs and symbols embodied within a particular circus act, and this somehow prevents them from entering that illusory world. Why certain people are unable to read the semiotics of the circus would be an interesting research project.

7: Circus; the timeless art – always modern

Bouissac (2007) talks about the timelessness of the circus. His premise is that existing circus skills are rooted in our primeval past; skills that gave us the ability to survive in potentially hostile environments. But these are common innate skills, not specific only to circus performers; most humans have the ability to run, jump, grasp, and balance. In this respect, we all could be circus performers if we choose to do so; but not everybody does. Rogers (1954) explores the nature of creativity and contends that embodied within the process of creativity is the desire to communicate. Man is a social animal. As Rogers (1954:256) states 'It is doubtful whether a human being can create without wishing to share his creation'.

From the earliest of times man has sought to find a creative means of expression and communication. All performance arts have roots in this need; the growth of classical Greek theatre from ritual beginnings (Hartnoll, 1968:8-9); the liturgical drama of the thirteenth

century (Ibid:35-36); ritual and folk dance; story-telling and song; and physical skills. Although the arts permeate our culture, individuals may choose to express themselves through these various art forms, and only a sub-set of individuals feels the need to express themselves creatively through the medium of circus. But the circus *per se* is a relatively modern institution that has evolved rapidly since its inception 250 years ago.

Bouissac (2010:12) contends that 'The circus was originally a strategy of ephemeral acceptance and precarious survival devised by ethnic minorities that were not allowed to settle for business in villages and towns.' He does not define the term circus. If he is referring to circus as a distinct artistic genre, then the statement is flawed. It is widely accepted that the foundations of the circus, as a discrete entertainment, began with Philip Astley. An examination of early contemporary newspaper advertising[5] shows that the first circus companies were dominated not by ethnic minorities but by loyal British subjects, and often established publicly supported semi-permanent circus buildings in which to perform. Astley consciously chose to perform on horseback and went on to establish permanent amphitheatres in several cities.

Although pragmatic in his decision to present equestrian demonstrations as an entertainment, Astley was already drawing upon old skills and presenting them in a new and innovative manner. Equitation was perceived as a 'manly' activity (Kwint, 2002:340) and Astley, the war veteran, was the epitome of the heroic and loyal subject. However, his equestrian skills also portrayed a Romantic ideal of man's superiority over the fiery steed. His performances with 'Little Billy the Military Horse' showed how the horse could be taught to die and then to be re-born (Willson Disher, 1937:24). Here was an innovative and entertaining approach to demonstrating his skills in horse management that appealed not only to the public's sense of horse appreciation but also resonated with its sense of loyalty and patriotism. I consider this act to be the first conscious 'artistic' decision taken by Astley to ensure interest from his public; the success of his shows depended upon the support of a paying audience.

The circus has always been modern: contemporary. It is of its time, reflecting both prevalent social attitudes and the growth of new technology, and therefore constantly adapting and evolving. It has made itself available for re-invention (Bolton, 2004:128). It could not afford to stagnate because it would lose public patronage, and therefore its livelihood. Even in the

face of competition from the growth of cinema and the music halls in the late nineteenth century, and the later social upheavals of the first and second world wars, the circus managed to survive and still remain popular. A post-war economic boom created a new more affluent society, with an increase in leisure time and disposable income (Hollow, 2014:3). This helped bolster the support for the circus as a popular entertainment. The industry became dominated by the circuses of Bertram Mills, Billy Smart, and the Chipperfield family. Wherever these circuses appeared they drew huge crowds. Photographs held in the Leodis Leeds Libraries Photo Archive reflect how popular these circuses were, and show crowds flocking to the Bertram Mills circus on Woodhouse Moor in Leeds in the 1950s[6].

It was the rapidly changing nature of society in the late 1960s that placed the circus under a tremendous strain and triggered further development. Audiences increasingly turned away from the circus due to bad press, animal rights campaigners, television, film and the expanding leisure industry. I believe that a further significant factor, particularly in the UK, was the cultural change in the structure of the family unit. Families were becoming comparatively more affluent and more mobile. In the first half of the twentieth century it was common to find several generations of one family in one, or neighbouring streets. The extended family unit was the common focus; it did things together. The circus had been well supported by this structure. I can remember as a child in the early 1950s being taken to the circus by my mother and my grandparents; three generations sharing the experience together. Now it was becoming increasingly more common for children to move away from their parents, not just to the end of the street but to other towns and cities, and even further afield. When the circus came to town there was no longer that family 'excitement' that embraced all familial generations. I discussed this point with Teresa Ricou, the founder and director of Chapitô, the circus school of Lisbon, during my visit there in 1994[7]. We were comparing the status of circus in the UK with how it appeared in Europe. She commented that when a circus arrived in a town in Portugal there was still an excitement that enthused entire families, who would then go to the circus as a family unit.

The classical post-Astleian circus was becoming seen by some performers as an archaic institution, inward looking and closed to the outside world. It was perceived to follow the maxim that 'you teach your children and nobody else'. The circus was facing a rapid decline.

‘Art dies with inbreeding … art has devoured its own ideas, or has been devoured by it’ (Baudrillard, 2003:97, cited Bolton, 2004:129)

Inward looking, as Baudrillard implies, the circus was creating a world of stereotypical performers. Circus needed to change – or stagnate. The change came not from within, but from external factors previously mentioned. As a reaction to the classic post-Astleian form, the New Circus movement was a developmental step that encouraged circus directors to review their own practices and to adapt to the demands of a new society. Exotic ’wild’ animals were removed from shows, although horses and some domesticated animals still appeared. However, sometimes this was due to simple economics. When communism collapsed and the circuses of the former Soviet Union had to adapt to market forces, the Hungarian State Circus[8] began to feel the financial pinch. In an article for the *Magyar Nemzet*, Domoskos (1991) reports how the elephant stables now house ping-pong tables – because they do not need feeding. Shows now sometimes had a narrative and/or theme that linked individual acts whilst still maintaining the classic format. Gender stereotypes were challenged. There was a move by some circuses to review their portrayal of feminine roles, particularly in relation to costuming; the fish-net tights, spangled figure hugging bodice, and plumed head dress of the mid twentieth century were discouraged. Not all classical post-Astleian circuses followed this line, some seem to be stuck in the 1970s and the debate over female representation is still an ongoing issue (Ward, 2016:168-171), (Sizorn, 2011). The changes that were made were a slow transformative process that ran in parallel, but not in direct opposition, to the development of the New Circus.

8.1: Le Nouveau Cirque

Social revolutions often trigger artistic revolutions. In the same way that the socio-political upheavals of the eighteenth century paved the way for Astley and his equestrian displays, the events of 1968 and afterwards laid the foundations for a very different style of circus. It was a period of ‘contestation’; protests were being held across Europe, Asia and the USA, but it was the events in Paris that seemed to be the catalyst. In May, workers downed tools and joined already protesting university students in a mass demonstration in the city. Although the rebellion was quelled without military intervention and De Gaulle’s right wing

government returned to power in an election, the seeds of social and cultural change had been sown; the old order had been challenged. In the sphere of performance art, new freedoms were being explored. This was especially notable in theatre and new theatrical forms were operating outside of the accepted conventional and traditional structures. Questions were being raised about the nature of the relationship between performers and audience; about the nature of a collective and celebratory creativity, and the centrality of the physical body as a means of performative communication (Maleval, 2016). A combination of street- theatre and elements of existing circus skills combined to create a new form of circus; the *nouveau cirque*[9] or new circus as it became more widely known. Pascal Jacob, well-known French cultural theorist, maintains that, 'Circus underwent a transformation in Spring 1968, and faced a public rejection of its codes' (Jacob, 2010 cited Lavers, 2014:56).

During the next decade, new performance groups such as Cirque Bidon (later to become Archaos) and Cirque Baroque developed a very different ideology from the traditional circus. Bolton (2004) contends that Jerome Savery and his company Le Grand Magic Circus were at the forefront of this movement, fusing elements of carnival, street-theatre, and circus into a revolutionary form of entertainment. Contrary to popular perception of some new circus proponents, there was no cataclysmic schism between the traditional circus and this new form; it was a sustained period of growth and development. New Circus grew out of the traditional form; it could not have existed without the Traditional Circus. Pierre Bidon (formerly Pillot), of Archaos, claimed that, 'Archaos is without doubt the most traditional of circuses' (Bidon, 1991:12).

There were several fundamental differences, as outlined in Bolton (1987), but significant was the question of ownership. No longer was the circus to be seen as the preserve of a rarefied and distinct group of family performers; now circus was to be accessible to all. Circus was now to be an art form of the people – not just for the people, a shared experience, owned by the people. It challenged norms in performance and allowed for an engagement with social and political issues (Hayes, 2009).

8.2: The not so new 'New' circus

It is interesting to note that today there are still those who steadfastly refer to themselves as New Circus performers. I contend that there is no longer such a thing a New Circus. It is now fifty years old and there are at least two generations of current performers who have had no direct experience of the classic post-Astleian circus pre 1970. It now has a history and invented tradition of its own and without an understanding of the circus within its wider historical context, there is little surprise that some practitioners see themselves as having begun the circus 30 years ago (Baltrop, 2018). 'New' was a label used to differentiate an evolving style of circus from the classic post-Astleian circus. It was new in as much as it was, at that time, developing a new aesthetic centred on the physicality of the human body in performance, irrespective of gender, race, and other cultural identifiers.

New Circus artists claimed to be creating a new art form of circus, but this implies that they viewed the classic circus as being of little merit; 'stigmatised as mere entertainment without any artistic connotations' (Biskupovic, 2014:4). Yet, in essence, they were drawing upon the traditional skills seen in the classic circus, re-packaging them, and presenting them in a new way; the juggler was still the juggler; the acrobat still the acrobat. Nikolai Poliakof[10] referenced this in a BBC interview, 'The acts didn't change …only the costumes … props … they were camouflaged in a modern way.' (Late Night Line Up, BBC, 1966)

Circus Oz, founded in Australia in 1978 as a part of this new wave of circus entertainment, also acknowledged the skills and tricks of the traditional [classic]circus but wanted to develop a new style of show that audiences could relate to[11]. Their original shows were presented beneath a big-top, and whilst retaining (and developing) the basic circus skills, they wanted to create circus that was physical, celebrated equality, and that was company orientated, rather than what they considered to be the hierarchical structure of the classic style. The early 'new' circus groups created their own distinct ethos. Circus Oz became known for shows that made fun of the perceived risk in circus (Tait, 2005), and they are still continuing today with their Sidesault Programme, which according their website 'is about taking risks, leaping off the edge and creating a hub for innovation … and development in the circus arts'[12]. Archaos was known for being provocative, political, and scandalous; Cirque Baroque interwove story with physical action to create a new gestic performance language; Cirque Plume mixed theatre, music, and circus.

8.3: Contemporary Circus

Out of this melange of new ideas evolved what is termed today as Contemporary Circus. Kreusch (2018:93) defines contemporary circus as 'not only to a change in content, form, and aesthetics but also to a shift in socioeconomic conditions that raises new challenges of production, living conditions, and mobility.' Kavanagh (2017:2) gives us an alternative definition, 'it has come to mean - like in dance or theatre - something avant garde or experimental.' And examples of influential British contemporary circus groups are NoFit State Circus, Gandini Juggling, and Ockham's Razor.

As stated previously, all circus is contemporary, of its time. In the currently labelled Contemporary Circus there is no primacy of individual acts, circus skills are woven into the very structure of the performance piece and they are often single discipline shows. In the classic post-Astleian circus of the pre 1970s, the circus show was the sum of its constituent acts. In the Contemporary Circus the show has a totality of its own. It is often a fusion of circus, theatre, dance, and music. Some people refer to this form as Circus-Theatre or Integrated Circus, with its often narrative style and embodied social and political comment.

The Canadian based Cirque du Soleil is perhaps at the forefront of the global development in Contemporary or Circus Theatre. 'The Cirque is credited with having formed a hybrid – and in many ways post-modern - art form, combining the circus with elements of dance, theatre, music, and [now] television.' (Leslie and Rantisi, 2011:1772) It has done so much to raise the awareness of circus to the modern public in the last two decades in particular.

Beginning in the early 1980s near Quebec in Canada, the embryonic Cirque du Soleil was initially a combination of circus skills and street theatre. As it grew in reputation it became known for its mixture of circus, fantastical costuming, choreography, and original music. Its 1987 show *We Reinvent the Circus*, was an enormous hit and did just what it said – the Cirque du Soleil had seemed to reinvent the circus. Or had it? The case could be argued that the Cirque is indeed drawing upon a form developed by Astley and his competitors two centuries earlier.

> 'In many respects, Cirque du Soleil can be seen to be the inheritors of the spectacular illegitimate circus of the 18th and 19th Century. The inheritance

> can be seen in Cirque du Soleil's entrepreneurial daring, the corporeal dramaturgy privileging the affective power of the body over the use of words, in the performers presented primarily as character bodies, and in the delivering of essential text either as a prologue or as lyrics to songs. It can also be seen in Cirque du Soleil's innovative staging design.' (Lavers, 2014:3)

So it would seem that, as Poliakof mentioned earlier, the acts do not change – they are just camouflaged in a modern way to engage a modern audience.

8.4: The growth of Social Circus

As the so called Contemporary Circus has developed into the twenty first century, so we have witnessed the evolution of Social Circus. This can be defined as 'a social change intervention that uses the circus arts as a tool for fostering personal and social development of identified 'at-risk' individuals.' (American Circus Educators website; Social Circus, 2018), and was promoted and developed by the Cirque du Monde[13] as part of Cirque du Soleil's global citizenship intervention programme, during the mid-1980s.

Social Circus is an off-shoot of Contemporary Circus; they feed each other in a symbiotic relationship. Social Circus itself can be sub divided into further categories. The 'hobbyist' circus strand provides a platform for individuals to develop a skill, mainly centred around the various juggling activities, for no other reason than they want to acquire that skill. They have little or no interest in developing the skill towards performance, although some may do. Often these individuals may form clubs or groups and so we find many juggling clubs around the country. Aligned with this we find the youth circus movement. Many towns and cities around the country have a youth circus, in some cases maybe more than one. The National Association of Youth Circus (NAYC) was founded at an inaugural international youth circus conference that I organised in Leeds in 1993. At its height the NAYC had over one hundred member groups (Ward, 2017:5-6). And this was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the projected number of actual groups around the country. Youth circuses provide several

functions. Some of them operate as circus based youth clubs with the emphasis being upon social interaction. Others focus upon a more disciplined and structured programme, providing a broad circus skills training that might, although not always, lead to performance work. Yet other groups are solely focused upon producing performance art. Many youth circus members move on to study circus at either the National Centre for Circus Arts in London, or at Circomedia in Bristol, or even at one of the circus training centres across Europe. Although here in the UK we sadly lack the circus training provision of many of our European neighbours I was pleased to notice recently that Derby University is also to offer a Master's Degree course in Dance and Contemporary Circus for 2019 (Masso, 2018). Reflecting the resurgent interest in the circus arts, there seems to be a growing awareness of a demand for circus training provision within the UK.

Circus can also be used within the school system. Not just as a discrete subject but also as a means of educational and social development for young people. This an example of how an art form may be used as a pedagogic tool, and has parallels with Drama in Education and Dance in Education. Reg Bolton was a pioneer in working with circus and young people. Many of us who followed in his footsteps from the late 1970s had anecdotal evidence that children involved in circus skills activities appeared to benefit both socially and educationally. An early research project that I carried out in a school in the 1990s quantified progress made by children who worked in circus skills against those who had not. This was one of the first projects of its kind in the UK and the results showed that circus skills work did have a beneficial effect (Ward, 2017:160-183). Subsequent social programmes and projects by Maglio and McKinstry (2008), Heller and Taglialatela (2018), and Henthoff (2018), among others, all reflect the evidence that young people do benefit by being involved with circus skills. The science behind this noted progress requires further research but scientists have been aware that juggling certainly has a developmental effect upon the brain. This is discussed in some detail by Wall (2018) and if juggling can have this effect then, logically, it could be argued that other physical circus activities could have a similar effect, but this is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss further.

Contemporary and Social circus are two sides of the same coin. They are distinct and yet intrinsically entwined. Contemporary circus performances inspire and enthuse young people

who see them. Some may go on to become members of youth circuses; some may go on to train in the circus arts and become professionals themselves. As Kristóv István, the former director of the Hungarian State Circus, once said to me 'the hope of the circus lies with the children in their schools' (Ward, 2017:85). He is right. The circus will continue to evolve but it will be future generations who will implement this evolution.

Conclusion

So where is circus now? Would Astley recognise the circus that we see today? It has come a long way in the 250 years since he gave his first exhibitions in 1768. It has, and still is, constantly evolving, reinventing itself, and yet it still references the Astleian circus of former years. The costumes have changed, the props have changed, the music has changed, and even in some cases the space has changed. But essentially the circus is the same; as Poliakof commented above. Tait and Lavers (2005:6) offered a working definition of circus that I feel could apply to circus across its history,

> 'circus is an art form which explores the aesthetic potential of extreme physical action by bodies (animal, human and post-human) in defiance of cultural identity categories including species, and usually performing live with apparatus in big to small enterprises often with costuming, music or a sound score, lighting, and technological effects including filmed footage'.

Circus is an art form and I do not think that Astley would wildly disagree with this definition, as it could just as well apply to his circus then as it does to us today.

Where does the circus go from here? Who can predict where the evolutionary path will lead us? Already there is an increasing use of technology within circus performances. The Cirque du Soleil are noted for this in their often complex staging. Should we now start talking about Technocirque? Will it ever be possible that technology will replace the human element within the circus? Robots have been programmed how to juggle[14], to walk a tight rope[15,] and even to unicycle[16]. Will we in the future sit down to watch a completely robotic circus? Personally, I hope not; I believe not. Circus relies upon the human element. The audience needs to empathise with the performers' risk, whether it be as extreme as the high wire walker who may fall or as mundane as the clown about to get doused with a bucket of water. The audience

needs to feel an emotional response to the situation as much as the performer(s) need to feel that response from the audience. It is an interaction; a two way dynamic. As Sidney 'Iking' Bateman stated in the short Youtube film *The Acrobat* (2018), 'The best feeling in the world is when someone in the audience can connect to you through the art that you portray on the stage'.

Society appears to function on ordered systems; everything in its place. It has been all too easy to label this form of circus, or that form. It has created divisions in the past and still does today. For those involved with the circus, I contend that whichever type of circus we say that we are involved with, it does not matter; we are all involved in the art of Circus. As Martin Burton, the director of Zippo's Circus said at a Circus250 meeting;

> 'It's about circus. It's not about division. If you think that your [type of] circus is better circus than someone else's, you're going down the wrong path. We all need to work together. We all need to promote circus. That is what's beautiful… We're all circus, we just have different roots to our goals.' (Burton, 2017 cited Kavanagh, 2017)

Notes

1. A selection of books written during this period are;
   Clarke, J. (1936) *Circus Parade*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd
   Smith, Lady E. (1948) *British Circus Life*. Ipswich: W.S. Cowell Ltd

2. www.cirquedusoleil.com/shows

3. In 1994 I was sent an 'illegally' made video-recording of the end of year show from a circus school Urumqi, north-west China. Sadly the tape has now degraded beyond repair

4. Circus250 is the umbrella organisation that has over-seen the national celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the modern circus by Philip Astley in 1768

5. https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

6. http://www.leodis.net/display.aspx?resourceIdentifier=2003219_26386660&DISPLAY=FULL

7. See Ward, S (2017) *Circus Notes and Jottings*. Ch 6
8. Now also known as the Capital Circus Budapest
9. Interestingly, the term nouveau cirque was actually not that new. A circus building with this name was built in Paris in the nineteenth century
10. Better known as Coco the Clown
11. See Circus Oz website https://www.circusoz.com/circus-oz/about-circus-oz/history.html
12. See Sidesault programme https://www.circusoz.com/sidesault/sidesault.html
13. See timeline https://www.cirquedusoleil/citizenship
14. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9asDO_1A27U
15. See https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/dr-geuro-robot-walks-tightrope
16. See https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/unicycling-robot

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